

SMOLDERING EMBERS

**On the set of Tobe Hooper's
Spontaneous Combustion**

by Stan Giese



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dedicated to the memory of
Eric Lasher

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INTRODUCTION: FUEL FOR THE FIRE

Kristopher Woofert

I first saw *Spontaneous Combustion* in the fall of 2018, as part of an intimate Tobe Hooper marathon with my friend and frequent collaborator, Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare. Over copious amounts of red wine and pasta-with-rapini-and-beans (Mario's exquisitely comforting Italian *cucina povera*), we screened most of Hooper's body of work weekly, chronologically. I thus had the benefit of viewing the film in the context of Hooper's unfolding struggle to sustain a keenly political vision against diminishing industry interest in, and support for, his artistry. I loved the film, for all its challenges, and still do. I see it as akin to other radical satires of its time, such as Larry Cohen's *The Stuff* (1985), John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988), George A. Romero's *Monkey Shines* (1988),^[1] and Brian Yuzna's *Society* (1989), all films whose sensibilities were definitively underground and decidedly B movie in their aesthetics and political approach, and all of which suffered either at the hands of critics or distributors.^[2] It is all too easy to dismiss *Spontaneous Combustion* as an ambitious failure by a director who just couldn't get a feel for the industry—too easy, because Tobe Hooper knew the industry, but instead refused to defer to it. His most expensive films, *Lifeforce* (1985) and *Invaders from Mars* (1986), both infamous box-office flops (despite mixed-to-positive reviews)—along with his later, critically derided *The Mangler* (1996)—are canny reinventions of 1950s Hammer horror and the B-movie sensibilities of 1950s sci-fi invasion films. Their tracings of the fissures in a hegemonic masculinity that can be tied to the Hollywood juggernaut continue to be framed as flaccid attempts by Hooper to play the big time after the success of *Poltergeist* (1982) (and to crawl out from under the shadow of producer-daddy Steven Spielberg). Yet they were actually a big, erect middle finger

to the selfsame powers that be.^[3] I am so convinced (and compelled) by this fact that I co-edited a scholarly book on Hooper with another friend and collaborator, Will Dodson, entitled *American Twilight: The Cinema of Tobe Hooper* (2021). And while my mention of that project may seem like opportunistic promotion, it is rather meant as a serious call to action for scholars, intellectuals, and creators (like the author of the book you hold in your hands), to sincerely reassess the work of Tobe Hooper.

Stan Giese is a kind of rogue archivist, working outside the hallowed halls of academia but firmly within the multiple realms of fandom, personal connection, and firsthand production experience. When Will and I were searching (frantically) for a complete version of Hooper's extremely rare^[4] experimental documentary *Peter, Paul and Mary: The Song Is Love* (1968–70, 1971), it was Stan who generously made that possible. And in subsequent discussions with Stan, it has become clear to me that he is one of the foremost authorities to consult in tracing Hooper's artistic process and creative vision.^[5] Recuperating a visionary body of work from a critical narrative that relegates it to the margins often starts with the fans and cinephiles, and Stan—though he knew and worked with Hooper—is one such figure, whose direct, personal access to the director's methods and personality is an aspect too easily dismissed from a scholarly discourse that values “critical distance.”

Smoldering Embers is many things. It is an intricately detailed production diary that taps into Hooper's working methods, on-the-ground challenges, and localized historical realities; it is a revealing look at the process of a (troubled) independent production; it is a narrative of artistic endeavor as communal, even familial; and it is a deeply personal reflection, revealing some of the frustration, but even more of the enduring perseverance and hope, with which artistic visionaries greet the demands and compromises of film production. When I first read it back in 2019, I was impressed by the detailed practical account of the film's production, but also was struck by the archivist's impassioned commitment to detail in relating the day by day, blow-by-blow experience of that production. Add to this the genuine affection Stan Giese has for Hooper as a person—along with Giese's-the-storyteller's gift of parsing out details in a way that compels interest in both the story and the teller himself—and you have the intriguingly hybrid contribution of *Smoldering Embers* to a fuller understanding of Hooper's sensibilities.

Witness one of the exemplary evocative passages from Stan's account—this one, of part of a closing scene that was shot, but never made it to the final cut:

It's a very weird metaphysical conceit they're trying to achieve with this shot. Conflicted, Sam threatens to trigger Lisa's inner fire, but his compassion for her overrides his passionate anger. Resigned to his own hellish fate, he vows, "I can take your fire with me! I can burn it out of you here and now!" He points one index finger directly at Lisa and with the other touches the reflection of the glowing crystal ball in the mirror. A swirling cyclone of wind and fire forms, dredging the atomic sickness from Lisa's body, ensnaring Sam, and ultimately being sucked into the mirror's infinite regress.

The image and frantic motion of "a swirling cyclone of wind and fire... being sucked into the mirror's infinite regress" comes about as close to an allegory of the diminishing returns of Hooper's artistic energies as any I could conjure. Here, Gieseck matches the passion of the artist with the conviction of the devotee, doing his utmost to paint a faithful picture of images that Hooper's viewers may never see.^[6]

What Stan Gieseck conjures in this chronicle of a troubled but inspiring production is a revelation for scholars who wish to understand how the politicized artist struggles to maintain visibility—not proclaiming from a pedestal, but working from within community and collaboration. Gieseck's astute and keen observations on the day-to-day production of *Spontaneous Combustion* suggest the kind of devoted artistic collective that is most visible in George A. Romero's mythical, mournful treatment of this theme in *Knightriders* (1981). That the similar collective spirit behind the making of *Spontaneous Combustion* has remained invisible—at least until now—is an unsung myth that accumulates implicitly in the minutiae of Gieseck's intricate chronicling of the film's production.

In *Smoldering Embers* Gieseck offers a play-by-play account of how an underground, close-to-the-bone production unfolds, and though his observations are occasionally from the sidelines or beyond (as when a group of production assistants, including the author, have to leave the set because their observing bodies produce unwanted shadows), Gieseck's account carries the electric energy of a close observer's viewpoint that gets about as near as one can come to the communal flame of artistic creation.

“Tobe likes a restless camera,” we learn in Giese’s account. But *Smoldering Embers* is also a portrait of the restless artist struggling to bring an ambitious vision to light against significant odds. Woven through the intricate, quotidian details of Giese’s production diary is an emerging portrait of Tobe Hooper as a director. Mostly quiet and, in Giese’s words, “like a sphinx sometimes, difficult to read,” Hooper the director is also deeply focused and enthusiastically committed to the production, occasionally to be found “humming and grinning as he puffs his cigar and sips his Dr. Pepper,” or “seem[ing] to be having a ball” as he “strolls around the parking lot, smiling and humming to himself.” It is rare to hear such representations of Tobe Hooper in this stage of his career, which, according to most scholarly and journalistic narratives, is definitively marked by gloom and doom.

Rather, it is Hooper’s vision of America that should be characterized by gloom and doom. “Just remember, when a dream appears, you belong to me,” sings Jo Stafford in the 1952 hit that underscores *Spontaneous Combustion*’s ironically happy early moments—its ill-fated “test” couple Brian and Peggy, sacrificing their health and future to help their nation achieve global supremacy by playing the perfect “nuclear family.” Brian and Peggy will, of course, spontaneously combust for their efforts—but not before producing a child marked by the scars of this American bid for global supremacy, a generational casualty of the nation’s march to be “at the forefront of technology and progress.” Hooper contextualizes the sacrifice of Brian and Peggy brilliantly in a voice-over that accompanies stock footage (and shrewd recreations) of Atomic test films where American soldiers unwittingly sacrificed their lives by being present at the site of nuclear detonations—soldiers’ small bodies moving around the desert foreground with mushroom clouds exploding on the horizon. That “Brian and Peggy ride the nuclear storm for us, to make our future safe,” becomes a lament, indicative of the film’s unfolding of just how damaging the policies of the United States were for its own citizenry, let alone the rest of the world. This is the political sensibility of Tobe Hooper.

Back in November 2019, Stan Giese graciously shared a selection of images from the *Spontaneous Combustion* production “sketchbook” that he’d been circulating around the cast and crew, asking them to contribute to the legacy of the film in their own, personal way. One such image, by 1st assistant cameraman Bill Roberts, features a wonderful caricature of

Hooper, cigar-in-mouth, hands-in-pockets, standing totem-like beside a director's chair. Another is a portrait of a beleaguered Brad Dourif by his daughter Kristina, her father holding up a flaming hand and announcing, "Hi honey, I am home." Among the most compelling of the images is a sketch by actor Brian Bremer of, in Stan's words, "some strange orgiastic mass."^[7] The image is one of ascending bodies, intertwined, but also creating an ecstatic/agonistic upward reach to an undefined sky.^[8] The fact that such intimate creations exist at all is something that gets at the heart of this book: they are the product of a collective of creators who became a family, and they are a kind of collective family portrait, an indispensable part of the story that Gieseck is telling here:

Arriving to the set on this last day of shooting, I'm greeted by Tobe, waving the sketchbook in the air and grinning. To my surprise, he's added three new drawings to its pages. The first is difficult to describe. It seems to be a kind of impressionist self-portrait made up of elements from the film; glowing eyes, a nuclear explosion, the toy carousel, all in bright hues of pink and yellow and red, and labeled, "Sam's Father."

The nuclear explosion described here in Hooper's self-portrait emerges from the top of his skull, once again giving credence to the "restless artist" working within the realm of creation and constraint, rewarding highs and crushing lows. The toy carousel is featured in the film as a gift from father to son; that it is later melted into a gruesome, degraded facsimile of the original is telling. The artist's creation is the artist's own monster, refracted back upon himself.

Of "*Spontaneous Combustion*'s penultimate scene," Gieseck writes: the hopelessly mutated, mutilated protagonist literally meets his maker. Olander is seen first as a shrunken silhouette in the greenish cast of the elevator's fluorescents. Smoldering in the darkness, Sam relishes the opportunity to confront him with the deadly fruits of his foul labors. ... It's a classic horror film trope, the moment when the creature destroys his creator.

Contemplating this passage, I cannot help but think of the empathetic monsters across Hooper's body of work. *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s Leatherface can be seen anxious and cowering when his domestic realm is threatened. *The Funhouse*'s childlike carnival Monster reacts violently to a

world that mocks his sexual curiosity and naiveté. And the gimp-like creatures in *Toolbox Murders* and *Mortuary*—both in the service of sinister supernatural powers—react (like Leatherface), violently to fortify the spaces that define and comfort them. As in *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), two films that are ur-texts for Hooper’s career-long representation of sympathetic monstrosity, the incarnation of the “monster” Sam in *Spontaneous Combustion* resonates with the deepest sensitivity.

From Giese’s view of the intimate Hooper circle—occasionally, even from within Hooper’s home, with his favourite green plush chair acquired from the set of *Coming to America* and his five wire-haired terriers—emerges a chronicle of the creative community and family that become eclipsed when we talk about a single artist’s vision. In Giese’s account, *Spontaneous Combustion* is a communal production that is all passion and hope and grit, despite—and possibly due to—the exigencies of independent production. The acute details of Giese’s account are innumerable and teeter on overwhelming. Yet if you stick with this unfolding of layer-upon-layer of minutiae, something miraculous emerges—a sense of the production of any work of art as a kind of epic journey, with its pitfalls, obstacles, helpers and testers, instrumental “nobodies,” quotidian details, incessant ennui, and punctuating elation over a small discovery or breakthrough. The levels and layerings of intimate detail here are staggering, and the result is an unsparing account of a production from below—a chronicle that upends the sense of this ultimately troubled production as a might-have-been, turning it to something that was and *is* an achievement.

The final thing I will say is this. The “star” of this book is not Tobe Hooper but Stan Giese. And if there is one key way that Stan Giese’s personal observations assist in a critical reevaluation of *Spontaneous Combustion*, it comes in his straightforward portrait of the people involved in bringing a creative vision to light. It inheres in Giese’s account of the passion that goes into even the most troubled and challenged of productions. It gives evidence of the heart that Tobe Hooper put into his politicized works, despite the increasingly chilly reception he received upon unveiling them.

Kristopher Woofert
Montreal, September 2021

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FOREWORD

BY THE AUTHOR

What follows is an account of the day-to-day process of making Tobe Hooper's notorious film *Spontaneous Combustion*, written predominantly during its principal photography. I first met Tobe^[9] on the set of *Invaders from Mars*, his remake of William Cameron Menzies' 1953 science fiction classic. It amounted to little more than a passing nod but marked the beginning of a chapter in my life that contains many fond memories and formative experiences.

Hooper's film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (TCM) had so traumatized me as a young teenager that I barely slept a wink in the three weeks after having seen it. That the movie's effect on me was so powerful is all the more noteworthy since I had seen it on a triple bill (they had such things in those days) alongside *Fists of Fury* (Bruce Lee's precursor to *Enter the Dragon*) and the director Michael Findlay's absurd *Shriek of the Mutilated*. Both films swiftly faded from memory while TCM's potent imagery and relentless terror continued to haunt me.

I was next exposed to the Hooper name in the credits of the television adaptation of Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot*. (In the interim, Hooper had directed *Eaten Alive*, but, because of poor distribution and an utter lack of promotion, it was not widely seen. It wasn't until years later, on video, that I would be treated to Neville Brand's one of a kind performance in the director's moody bayou killer-croc burlesque.) Given the constraints of television in the 1970s, *Salem's Lot* is shockingly good and profoundly unnerving, due in large part to Hooper's brooding style and command of his

craft as well as Paul Monash's solid teleplay. (The film has held up far better than David Soul's unfortunate hairstyle.)

Hooper's next project was *The Funhouse*, ostensibly an entry into the then-current teen slasher film craze. Fortunate enough to have caught the film during its initial limited theatrical run, I remember at the time feeling disappointed that it bore no relation to the primal horrors of *TCM*. It wasn't until after many subsequent viewings that I came to appreciate its subtle strength, sophisticated color palette, and sly tweaking of genre conventions.

Poltergeist proved to be both a triumph and a bane to Hooper's career. A box office smash, justifiably lauded by critics and audiences alike, Hooper's flame was irrevocably dimmed by persistent rumors that the film was not, in fact, directed by him, but instead by producer/co-writer Steven Spielberg (owing largely, I think, to a basic misunderstanding of the elusive nature of the producer-director relationship). Despite Spielberg's many statements defending Hooper's role in the making of the film, the rumor continues to be promulgated to this day, effectively depriving Hooper of the well deserved credit for his most critically (apart from *TCM*) and financially successful effort.

Unable to capitalize on the accomplishment of *Poltergeist* with any of the major studios (very possibly because of the public perceptions regarding his contribution to the film), Hooper signed a three-picture deal with Cannon Films. Cannon was an outfit run by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus and known primarily at the time for producing Chuck Norris features and low budget actioners. Hoping to improve their brand, Golan and Globus scooped up Hooper for their stable, apparently expecting to capitalize on his estimable talent and name recognition.

Hooper's first film under the Cannon banner was to be an adaptation of Colin Wilson's novel *Space Vampires*, reportedly budgeted at a then-astronomical 25 million dollars. After nine months of production in England, the resulting film, now inexplicably retitled *Lifeforce*, failed to catch fire with the moviegoing public. It could be argued that the new title amounted to false advertising, suggesting a film more akin to a Robin Cook thriller rather than the wacky homage/parody of 1960s Hammer films, such as *The Creeping Terror*, that it turned out to be. One can't help but think that the original title might have allowed the movie to more readily reach its target audience. (Film publicist and good friend Scot Holton once described the film to me in this way: "When you're laying awake at 3:00 am, staring

at the TV and flipping channels, desperately searching for something to watch, *this* is the movie you're looking for!")

I was invited to a screening of the theatrical release version of *Lifeforce* at 20th Century Fox studios, where I caught my first glimpse of Tobe Hooper in the flesh. He was in the lobby of the Cary Grant Theater welcoming Billy Idol to the showing, having just recently directed Idol's music video "Dancing with Myself." Hooper was elfin, with a neatly trimmed beard and mischievous eyes.

I had always enjoyed this version of the film but was very pleased years later when a director's cut was released on DVD, restoring it to its original shape by incorporating about twenty minutes of footage back into the film and reinstituting John Larroquette's opening narration, rendering *Lifeforce* a richer and more coherent concoction (although not nearly as entertainingly silly). If only they had restored the original title as well.

As a result of *Lifeforce*'s poor prospects at the box office, the budget of *Invaders from Mars*, Hooper's next Cannon project, was sliced virtually in half during production. Still, it was a large undertaking. The set for the interior of the Martian spaceship and the surrounding network of tunnels took up the entirety of the immense hangar in Long Beach that had once housed Howard Hughes' Spruce Goose, now refitted as a soundstage. Stan Winston's creature shop had been enlisted to construct the Martian drones and the Supreme Martian Intelligence, based on designs by concept artist William Stout.

When asked by publicist Scot Holton if I would like to work as an extra on the film, I enthusiastically agreed. It would be my first exposure to large-scale filmmaking, and any excuse to get onto the set would do. Holton's influence would also secure a place on the crew for another close friend, still photographer Eric Lasher.

On the first day that I was scheduled to shoot, I arrived on the set early and, along with several dozen other young men, was issued a marine uniform. When a production assistant asked for volunteers who would be willing to have their heads shaved in military fashion, I eagerly raised my hand, supposing that it might provide me an advantage over the other extras. It was only after I had received my buzz cut that it was announced that we would be wearing helmets on camera at all times. Mildly deflated, I was on the receiving end of more than a few mean-spirited snickers from the others.

We received instruction on accurate comportment and proper handling of weapons by Dale Dye, a retired marine captain acting as military advisor on the film. Dye would eventually go on to gain great notoriety in the film industry by drilling the casts of *Platoon* and *Saving Private Ryan* with rigorous boot camp training in preparation for their roles as soldiers. Invariably playing a military officer, he would also appear as an actor in several films, most notably *Platoon* and *JFK*. Our paths would cross again.

My comrades and I spent the better part of the day inside a small soundstage on Gower Street in Hollywood, kicking up dirt and dust, getting filthy while running up and down a hillside mock-up as flashing lights and wind machines stirred up a storm around us. It was here, between takes, that Hooper gave me the nod. It was also here that I first met James Karen, the wonderful character actor and possibly the most charming man on the planet. He was cast in *Invaders from Mars* as General Wilson and would soon have the privilege of uttering the memorable lines, “Don’t look so worried, boy! We’re not out of options yet! *Marines have no qualms about killing Martians!*”

The following day’s shooting took place at night, on a hillside in Simi Valley that bore a startling similarity to the duplicate in the Gower soundstage. We spent the duration of the night running up and down that hill. The next night, a couple hundred of my fellow fake marines (along with a small contingent of real marines) and I gathered at the quarry adjacent to the hillside, the location of the sandpit where certain unfortunate characters in the film are sucked underground by sinister, organic Martian technology. On a ridge overlooking the pit, we struck poses or ran maneuvers as ordered, illuminated by the yellow glow from a huge rig known as a Musco light. For much of the filming, the camera was mounted on an ingenious device known as a Louma crane, which allowed for maximum flexibility of movement. It was fascinating to watch and made it possible for the crew to complete an incredible number of complex setups. Observing the process of filmmaking first hand also proved to be an effective diversion from the bitter cold.

These few days of extra work constituted the sum total of my contribution to the film, although I did visit the set periodically during the remainder of the shoot.

When *Invaders from Mars (IFM)*, like *Lifeforce*, failed to perform in the marketplace, Cannon very nearly rescinded Hooper’s contract. Instead, they

again slashed the budget on his next enterprise, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (TCM2), a proposed sequel to his notorious first feature. To make matters worse, once production was under way in Austin, Texas, they eliminated an entire week from the shooting schedule.

To Hooper's credit, in the face of budgetary constraints, less-than-supportive studio executives, and the stifling Texas heat, he managed to produce what has, in the intervening years, rightly come to be regarded as a genre classic. Very different from its predecessor in that *TCM* had little in the way of explicit gore, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* is a garish, candy-colored splatter comedy. It is both a parody of and an homage to viscera on film: from the works of Herschel Gordon Lewis (*Blood Feast*, 2000 *Maniacs*) through the movies of George A. Romero (*Night of The Living Dead*, *Martin*, *Dawn of the Dead*), to the more contemporary slasher films (John Carpenter's *Halloween*, and the *Friday the 13th* series).

Both of my good friends Scot Holton and Eric Lasher were engaged on the film as, respectively, unit publicist and still photographer, so I received intermittent correspondence regarding the progress of the production. During the show, Lasher struck up a friendship with Tony Hooper (his given name is William, but as far as I know, he has always been known as Tony), Tobe's extremely talented son. Tony worked in the prop shop, designing and constructing many of the film's more outlandish artifacts, most notably the skeleton chandelier that hangs above the dinner table in the "Mad Tea Party" scene and the vaguely Aztec backboard on the chair to which Stretch (Caroline Williams' misfortunate character) is bound.

Perhaps unfairly, *TCM2*'s lackluster box office take amounted to strike three for Hooper's reputation. His contract with Cannon had ended, and it would be a few years before he could get another feature film project off the ground. In the meantime, he ventured back into television with an episode of Spielberg's series *Amazing Stories*, featuring "Weird Al" Yankovic as a cabbage-headed alien promoting an interstellar beauty pageant (the cast also included James Karen and Laraine Newman from *IFM*, as well as Jim Siedow from *TCM* and *TCM2*). Hooper also helmed the pilot episode of *Freddy's Nightmares*, the ill-fated series derived from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, and a well-received episode of *The Equalizer*.

Shortly following their return from Texas, Eric Lasher had officially introduced me to Tobe.

Eric's gregarious personality and kinship with his son had endeared him to Tobe, and they became more like friends than colleagues. He drafted Eric to organize his video collection and file system, so Eric and I began to spend a lot of time at the Hooper household. Even at home, Tobe was a very private person, more often than not secluded in the master bedroom, studying for his upcoming projects.

However, on occasion he would emerge from his solitude, sink into an emerald green plush chair (acquired from the set of the Eddie Murphy vehicle *Coming to America*), and regale us with stories and anecdotes from his life. The living room was populated with memorabilia from his career. It's difficult to express what a thrill it was to be allowed to hold the actual 16mm camera with which *TCM* was filmed.

Tony's room, where we spent a great deal of time, was in a constant state of flux as he juggled enumerable interests. It wouldn't be surprising to find the room completely rearranged from the day before; a new sculpture, a fresh coat of paint, disassembled electronics, a death mask, all might appear suddenly, as if by magic. It seemed to me a clear reflection of his unfettered creativity.

When Eric told me late in 1988 that Tobe's next project would be a feature film entitled *Spontaneous Combustion*, it was a given that he would be employed as the still photographer on the show. What surprised and delighted me was his offhand suggestion that I might be engaged as a film journalist. (I'd had some experience in that regard, having been a columnist and junior editor for an independent newspaper affiliated with San Jose State University some years prior.) Eric promised to speak with Tobe, and before I knew it, the deal was done. Eric and I would act as a team of trained observers, documenting the efforts of the cast and crew as they went about the business of making a movie, resulting in this book. It is in no way meant to be a complete or comprehensive dissertation detailing every aspect of what took place during the making of the film. I had no access to closed-door meetings or the intimate conversations of others. These are my recollections of my experiences and my perspective on those experiences, as derived from my extensive journal entries recorded during production and my own still vivid memories of the time.

Any omissions, misattributions, or factual errors are regrettable but probably unavoidable.

S. G.

PRE-PRODUCTION

SPARKS FLY

Tuesday, January 10, 1989

In Tobe Hooper and Howard Goldberg's original screenplay for *Spontaneous Combustion*, the character of Sam Kramer suffers mightily. Fire spits from his fingertips, flames burst from a suppurating wound in his arm, spew from his mouth, and explode from his eye socket. Ultimately, he is engulfed in a blazing, all-consuming inferno.

How to achieve these special effects is a key element in the planning stages of the film. A few short weeks before production begins, Tony Hooper, who will be an essential part of the visual effects team, is conducting a series of tests in the hope of discovering the best and most economical way to execute them. Tony has asked Eric and me to assist, so we join him one evening in the kitchen of his home, where he has rigged a rudimentary beam splitter, which is basically just a piece of glass mounted at a 45° angle to an optical device, in this case a video camera. It can be a simple way to create a sophisticated effect by superimposing onto a subject (A) the image of a second element (B) positioned at a 90° angle to the splitter and reflected in the glass.

For the purposes of this exercise, I stand in for the character of Sam. The object of the demonstration is to create the impression that my face is on fire. As the subject, I sit in a chair behind the pane of glass, a lamp at my feet to provide reactive light as the flames rise. Tony situates the element, a Styrofoam wig form wrapped in aluminum foil and painted black, into place in front of a black backcloth. Eric runs the camera and Tony sets fire to the wig form while I contort my face in pain and terror.

When it works, the illusion is quite convincing. We do several takes until we have one that pleases us all, then move on to the next assignment,

which is an attempt to fool the presumptive viewer into believing that my mouth (or rather, Sam's mouth) is belching fire like a flamethrower. Tony arms himself with a cigarette lighter and a can of aerosol hairspray. After using the video monitor to accurately adjust our relative positions, I mimic a touch of heartburn and throw open my mouth as Tony blasts the lighter's flame with aerosol cans of various household products, seeing which produces the most interesting fiery texture. WD-40 seems to work best. The effect is much more difficult to master than the mere blazing face, and we do take after take without a satisfying result.

Frustrated, then suddenly inspired, Tony decides to go for the eyes. He instructs me to act as if I'm having a seizure. As my head quavers and my eyes roll back into their sockets, Tony chooses precisely the right instant to strike, sending a perfect stream of molten fire erupting from my right eye as my face continues to burn. It's a startlingly effective image. Watching the playback over and over again, we laugh and laugh.

Later, when Tony has taken the tape into the other room to show Tobe what we have done, Eric and I can hear Tobe, speaking on the phone with someone, declaring, "Whoa! I'm watching a guy with fire coming out of his eye! God damn!"

Saturday, February 18, 1989 (?)

On a later occasion, Tony, Eric, and I meet up with visual effects supervisor and second unit director Steve Brooks at Eric's home in the valley, aiming to replicate our video achievement on film, a medium with a much higher resolution. Steve had worked with John Dykstra at Apogee Productions as a visual effects technician and motion control cameraman, among other things. He has brought along a 35mm Arriflex camera and quickly and confidently sets up the first shot while Tony and Eric assemble the beam splitter and I take notes.

For this shoot, we have enlisted Eric's cousin Warren as our "leading man." He has the requisite chiseled features and works cheap, which is to say for *nothing*. We use Eric's garage as a makeshift stage and Eric's car as a prop, with Warren in the driver's seat, poised to vomit flames out the open door. Warren learns quickly how difficult it is to writhe in pain and hold a fixed position simultaneously.

Getting the timing right is just one of the many problems that we struggle to overcome. After numerous takes comprising several setups and

much squandered film, the results are decidedly mixed.

In the end, this beam-splitter technique will not be used to produce any of the effects in *Spontaneous Combustion*.

The day nearly ends in tragedy when sparks from the flaming accelerant set fire to a black tarpaulin that we used to mask the set.

As I say, “Uh, Eric, I think we need the extinguisher here,” it goes up rather quickly.

Batting at the flames with his bare hand (which will raise a nasty blister soon), Eric is confident that he has everything under control. An invited onlooker visiting the set grabs the fire extinguisher and struggles unsuccessfully to get it to work as the fire nibbles at the garage door. Eric takes it from him, pops the seal, and douses the flames.

That about wraps it up for the day.

Monday, February 20, 1989

At yet another test session conducted in Eric’s garage, Tony has ingeniously constructed a cable-driven, articulated metal skull. When covered in foil and doused with propellant, it could be set afire and puppeteered as if it were speaking. (Near the end of the screenplay, Sam has a lengthy and impassioned monologue while fully engulfed in flames. It was with this sequence in mind that the puppet was designed, intending that the actor’s performance be combined with that of the talking, flaming skull using timeworn double exposure techniques.) We rehearse the skull by having it perform to a playback of “Springtime for Hitler.”

We cover our video camera lens with a green gel and direct orange reflective light onto the skull in order to give the flames a surreal quality. Tony and I operate the mechanism, lip-synching to a subdued audio recording of some dry lecturer while the thing nonchalantly burns. The effect works wonderfully—excellent flexible movement, very convincing.

Tony’s mechanical cranium will, in fact, be used in the film, but not as originally intended.

Tuesday, February 21, 1989

The following day (roughly one week before shooting is scheduled to begin), Eric and I take a drive out to Saugus, to a huge warehouse where the

construction crew is assembling several sets and props for the film. Among them, the exterior walls of the claustrophobic blast bunker and the rather rickety-looking atomic bomb. It'll look great when it's finished, I'm sure. Very retro.

Assistant art director Richard McGuire greets us and shows us around, answering our questions and explaining how things work. A friendly and expansive fellow, Richard seems to have efficiency in his blood. He says that he's not concerned with what's needed first or next. He figures to have it all done at once and to be ready for anything.

Wednesday, February 22, 1989

We meet up the next day at Steve Neill's workshop, a converted garage attached to his Granada Hills home. Steve is a veteran special effects makeup professional, having previously worked on dozens of films, including Todd Holland's *Fright Night* and the Larry Cohen oddity, *Q*. He is also an avid aeronautics enthusiast, as evidenced by the schematics adorning the walls and the multitude of model planes hanging from the ceiling.

We're there to watch as Brad Dourif's right eye and neck are cast in pliable foam latex. A remarkable actor, highly regarded for his Academy Award-nominated performance as Billy Bibbit in Milos Foreman's classic *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and his more recent turn in *Mississippi Burning*, Dourif has been cast as Sam Kramer in *Spontaneous Combustion*.

When Brad arrives, he quickly removes his shirt and has a seat in a high, canvas chair. He seems at first a bit uneasy when I whip out the video camera, but loosens up almost immediately, becoming talkative and funny while studying his script. Steve Brooks is also there, and Brad and the two Steves make small talk while prepping for the application of the latex. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* plays softly in the background.

Assisted by his wife Jillian and her daughter Beth, Steve applies a thick, gooey substance to Brad's eye, kneading it repeatedly as it sets. In the script, Sam's eye bursts with fire and later a goiter on his neck grows to the size of a golf ball, then erupts like a volcano. These appliances will enable Neill to produce the necessary makeup to pull off the effects.

The eye mold comes off without a hitch, so they move directly on to the neck cast. The same procedure is followed and the latex sets easily. Steve

and Jillian's two dogs wander disinterestedly through the room.

When the time is right, Brad speaks breathlessly in mock excitement: "Are we ready? It's almost the moment, the tearing off...the tearing off of the goop. Here it comes. I can hardly stand it, the crowd's going crazy. What will it be? Oh, yes! It's getting close, it's...it's...!"

"It's a boy!" jokes Steve Brooks.

Steve Neill smoothly removes the neck appliance, saying proudly, "See, no bubbles."

Squinting, Brad points to a spot on the neckpiece and says softly, "There's a bubble right there."

To which Steve replies, "Shhh!"

Thursday, February 23, 1989

With only three days left to go before principal photography, Eric and I stop by John Landis' office at Universal Studios to pick up a current picture of the director of *Animal House*. Apparently, he's set to make a cameo appearance as a burn victim, and the photo is needed for use in a mock news broadcast.

When we drop off the photograph at Tobe's place, he's nowhere to be seen. This late in the game, he's probably holed up in his room, preparing for battle. We leave the pic with Rita Bartlett, Tobe's assistant.

Friday, February 24, 1989

Eric and I travel to Valencia Studios, right across the highway from Magic Mountain, where the bulk of *Spontaneous Combustion* is slated to be shot. Initially, we wound up at the wrong soundstage by mistake, but eventually found our way to the SHC^[10] stage.

Parked outside the stage is the pristine 1951 fire-engine red Studebaker that will serve as Sam's vehicle in the movie. Inside, the various interior sets are taking shape: the wide corridors of Olander's mansion with its distinctive octagonal window, Nina's cozy homestead, Lisa's art deco apartment. The disassembled components of the bomb shelter and bunker are stacked neatly to the side, waiting to be pieced together.

Production designer Gene Abel greets us and gives us a quick tour, obviously and justifiably proud of his crew. The air is thick with sawdust

and the sound of power tools and pounding hammers.

In the upstairs production office, Eric introduces me to director of photography (DP) Levie Isaacks. A Texas native and lifelong friend of Tobe's, Levie is also, as I soon come to discover, one of the nicest guys anyone could hope to meet.

From there, we rush over to Thatcher Glass in Saugus, where the prop department focuses on putting the finishing touches on several things, including a roadside sign for the power plant, a wall-sized map dotted with pin lights to denote the location of nuclear facilities around the world, and what appear to be cockpit seats for the bomb shelter. Incidentally, someone has scrawled "Sanford" in big block letters on the side of the primitive, improbably plump A-bomb. (An apparent reference to unit production manager (UPM) Sanford Hampton, who I have yet to meet.)

There is still much to be done, but ready or not, we start shooting on Monday.

WEEK ONE

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Monday, February 27, 1989 - Day 1

First days can be awkward. First day at a new job, a new school, a new city. Unfamiliarity can be the source of considerable anxiety. On this morning of the first day of principal photography on *Spontaneous Combustion*, however, there seems no such apprehension.

We begin in the auditorium of John Marshall High School in Sylmar. The large room has a raised proscenium stage with a rich, royal blue curtain. At the moment, the stage is set with a hand-painted fairy castle backdrop and artificial topiaries. There is a great deal of activity as the crew prepares for the first shot of the show. Many new faces (to me, at least). Director of photography Levie Isaacks surveys the scene, conferring with the film's lighting director (more commonly referred to as the "gaffer") David Hayball about the setup.

As I enter the auditorium, I encounter costume designer Carin Hooper, a petite woman with long blonde hair and a lot of nervous energy. She is also, not coincidentally, the director's wife. She has acted as Tobe's costume designer since *Lifeforce*. Carin and I are friendly, having gotten to know each other during my many visits to their home. At the moment, though, she seems more than a little preoccupied.

She says to me, "If you see Julia, tell her to come to the truck right away!" and then hurries off in the direction of the costume trailer.

I nod, but since I have no idea who Julia is or what she looks like, I'll have no way of telling whether I see her or not. There are dozens of crew members milling about, most of whom I don't recognize.

Co-producer Jerry Lambert sits on the piano below the stage, watching the controlled chaos with bemused detachment.

Kristi “Kat” Morais, the 2nd assistant director (AD), approaches and hands me a complete, detailed shooting schedule, then hustles off to other, more important duties.

At 9:25 am, Brad Dourif comes on set for the first time, looking for all the world like a GQ model. His usually slack hair has been fashionably tousled and he’s neatly outfitted in khakis, tan shirt, and navy-blue blazer. There is a curious circular “birthmark” on the back of his right hand. Director Tobe Hooper is hot on his heels, ever-present cigar in his hand, brimming with vigor and eager to begin.

Cynthia Bain, who has been cast in the role of Lisa, Sam’s enigmatic girlfriend, arrives on the set costumed in a flowing skirt and shoulder wrap, resplendent in shades of purple and lavender, striking a marked contrast to Brad’s more earthy apparel. Bain has most recently appeared in Stan Winston’s truly scary debut feature, *Pumpkinhead*. In her videotaped audition, she is playful and vivacious, a perfect fit for the part. In terms of the theme of the movie, it could be said that Sam is the kindling and Lisa is the flame. Since all the action of the film occurs within the space of a single day, these outfits will constitute their basic wardrobe for the whole of the shoot.

Tobe conducts a rehearsal with Brad and Cynthia. In the scene, Sam is auditioning for the school play, while Lisa feeds him lines. Their dialogue comes from act 1, scene 1 of Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*, in which Lear upbraids his daughter Cordelia for her perceived ingratitude. The text contains the powerful and contextually evocative phrase, “by the sacred radiance of the sun.”

They run the scene a few times before the camera rolls. What’s perhaps most interesting about the scene is that Brad, a classically trained actor, is required to act poorly in the tryout. Sam performs his lines haltingly, is soundly rejected by the student director (energetically played by young actress Judy Prescott), then pulls Lisa aside for a brief, flirty exchange. Lisa playfully echoes the director’s opinion, cocks her hand as if holding a pistol and “shoots” Sam, who crumbles to the floor in mock death throes.

Tobe gives Brad a note to “really ham up” his death. It’s clearly evident that they have a genuine rapport. In fact, Tobe seems to have a kind of innate authority, to which everyone responds positively.

I notice that Steve Brooks is here, appearing very relaxed. He tells me that his only responsibility for the day is to provide a bit of smoke later this

afternoon.

At about 10:05 am, they roll the first take. Tobe calls “Action!” and Brad is pelted with glitter from above. As the scene progresses, students hoist in front of him a huge banner announcing the upcoming Shakespeare festival. When Brad walks to the end of the thrust stage to protest the student director’s estimation of his talent (“Really, Mr. Kramer, you *stink*”), key grip Todd Griffith smoothly rolls the camera dolly backward while Levie operates.

Todd is a film industry legacy. His father is legendary key grip Cary Griffith, highly regarded for his work on Martin Scorsese’s documentary *The Last Waltz*, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, and many other classic films. Todd has worked previously with Levie on Anthony Hickox’s film *Sundown*, and their mutual respect shows in their interaction. Few words are necessary.

Tobe has a brief discussion with Brad and Cynthia, revising the scene slightly and fine-tuning bits of business. Cynthia seems to be having some difficulty with the “tch” sound that she’s required to make when she fires her finger-pistol at Brad.

Take 2 is a wash. During take 3, the school bell rings in the middle of Brad’s recitation. Takes 4 and 5, though, are both excellent. Brad’s performance is always different, always interesting. Tobe’s grin is a mile wide. Time to move on to close-ups.

Cynthia’s close-up is a thing of beauty. Levie has given her a halo of gold that accentuates her amazing blue eyes. She looks simply stunning. After only a couple of takes, Tobe is pleased and anxious to move along to the next setup.

Tony Hooper has arrived inexplicably with a police car and an ambulance for a scene to be shot later in the day.

Meanwhile, the crew repositions the camera for a close-up on Brad, lit in a lustrous way similar to Cynthia’s. Between takes, Tobe has tiny conferences with him, refining his readings and tweaking his performance, while makeup artist Bill Miller-Jones powders Brad’s face and fluffs his coiffure.

Brad’s final take is terrific—funny and energetic.

“Okay, cut! Good, good, print. Great, great!” says Tobe, and instantly begins conferring with Levie on the next shot, a reverse on the student director and her team.

Tony's boyhood friend Chris Panagos "Nog" Callas plays one of the students. Although he's in his 20s, he can easily pass for a teenager. He stands at the back, operating a video camera on a tripod. Both Judy and Mimi Wearn, the young lady playing Vicki, the director's assistant, are actual teenagers. They each wear antinuclear armbands (as do Sam and Lisa), which will turn out to be central to the plot.

In order to provoke the appropriate reactions, Brad and Cynthia play the scene behind the camera for the benefit of the young actors. On "Action!" Brad douses himself in glitter and performs very broadly, with extravagant gestures and clumsy intonation. The students respond with puzzlement or barely concealed laughter as the camera booms down and dollies in close.

Before the last take, Tobe advises Mimi, "Give 'Give him the hook' a little more punch." So she does.

"Cut!" And scene 25 is in the can. We break for lunch at 1:55 pm.

During lunch, I finally meet the elusive Julia. She is wardrobe supervisor Julia Gombert, a tall, earthy woman with a great, shaggy lion's mane and an infectious laugh. This is her third collaboration with Tobe and Carin, having also done costumes for *IFM* and *TCM2*. She shares with me her desire to videotape her pet cockatiel tap dancing. I just nod.

The company reassembles on the street outside John Marshall High School at about 3:00 pm. It's a beautiful, clear afternoon. (John Marshall High is a common location for motion pictures and television, so the students leaving school for the day hardly give us a sidelong glance.) The Studebaker seems to have been freshly waxed. It gleams in the sunshine. Brad's stand-in Adriano DeFreitas, a reed-thin fellow with a prominent nose and stringy hair, sits behind the wheel as the grips bustle around the vehicle, securing the camera and lighting equipment to the hood. Assistant propman Bill Roberts wipes the windshield squeaky clean.

The shooting schedule calls for a different scene to be shot, but that appears to have been pushed to later in the day. Instead, they'll shoot a sequence of scenes (38, 38B) in which Sam drives around, listens to various radio broadcasts, opens a mysterious gift box on the seat beside him, and scans the surrounding environment.

Kat pipes up, "People, we're putting the artist in the car! That means we're *really close!*"

Meanwhile, I see Rita Bartlett hanging around and give her a wave as she smiles back.

In anticipation of riding in the open Shotmaker camera truck, Tobe has donned a leather jacket. Brad sits in the driver's seat of the Studebaker, and they chat about the upcoming series of shots. After a few last-minute adjustments, Tobe and Levie climb onto the camera truck and they speed off with the car in tow, accompanied by a motorcycle police escort.

Crowding onto the truck with them are key grip Todd, gaffer David, still photographer Eric, 1st AD Paul Moen, and 1st assistant cameraman (AC) Doug Adam. Script supervisor Nancy Karlin sits beside Brad in the car. They don't travel a block, however, before Todd asks them to stop.

He's noticed some irregularity in the rigging and hops out, saying, "I gotta do one thing."

David also leaps out and chimes in, "And while he does one thing, I'll do another!" and redirects the light source pointed at Brad.

While they wait, Tobe confers with Paul about the order of the action. Before long, they're off and running again, driving through the neighborhood streets as Tobe relays directions to Brad via walkie-talkie. When they're forced to make an unexpected stop at a busy intersection, Tobe improvises, having Brad glare out the window as if he's happened upon the despised Trinidad Beach nuclear power plant. ("Trinidad" has a deliberate resonance with "Trinity," code name for the US Army's first nuclear detonation in 1945.) They then continue, getting the remaining needed shots with relative ease.

On the way back, Tobe lights up a stogie and trades tales about Texas with Levie and David. Levie relates a story about a team of Texas oil prospectors who had procrastinated and nearly allowed their drilling permit to lapse. As Levie tells the story, "Well, they fucked around, y'know, and everything, and they said, 'We'd better go drill this hole, we got a permit about to run out.' So, they drove out to West Texas, but the truck broke down. It broke down *before* the place they were supposed to get to. Well, they say, 'Forget this, we'll just drill right here!' So they dug a hole and *struck the biggest oil field in the world!* And later, when they get to where they were headed, it was a dry hole! That's right, a dry hole!"

Everyone on the truck cracks up laughing.

At 5:30 pm, we regroup in the parking area behind the high school to shoot scene 27, which was intended to be shot earlier in the day. I meet Judith Jones, the young actress cast in the role of Jennifer, a student with a peculiar interest in Sam. She's sweet and very pretty. She's been here since 9:00 am and still hasn't spent a millisecond in front of the camera. Tobe walks her briefly through the scene.

There are lots of student extras milling about, Tony Hooper's boyhood friend Nog among them. They each wear either a pronuke or antinuke armband. In the script, there's a local political conflict about the imminent reopening of the Trinidad Beach nuclear power plant, after ten years of being off-line. Everybody chooses a side.

Dolly track has been laid for the first shot, but the sky begins to darken. They had hoped to shoot during "magic hour," the dusky twilight time when the light is golden, but there's a serious question of whether it's going to happen or not. Everybody is waiting around for confirmation.

Nope. Night has fallen too quickly, and the scene is rescheduled for tomorrow.

Tobe leaves for the day, but most of the crew remains. We gather at the side of a brick building on campus. The art department is dressing the building as the exterior of radio station KTMB. In this unscripted sequence, paramedics will emerge from the radio station with a black-bagged body on a gurney, the remains of an unfortunate technician who has become the victim of Sam's pyrokinetic wrath.

Paul Moen takes charge of the second unit. The crew is relaxed and chatty, anticipating the end of a long, productive day.

They shoot the scene in 2 takes, on 35mm and ½ inch video. As red and blue lights flash, two paramedics wheel the gurney to the ambulance, passing radio psychologist Dr. Persons, having an animated conversation with a grim-faced police officer. This footage will be shown on television as a news report during a later scene.

The role of Dr. Persons is played by Joe Mays, who bears a striking resemblance to another fine character actor, Michael Jeter, although with even less hair.

UPM Sanford Hampton selflessly provides his vehicle to be used in the final shot of the day, the "martini." In this shot, smoke billows from an abandoned car as the paramedics wheel yet another body-bagged corpse to

their waiting ambulance and a police officer sparks a flare. There's some slight confusion since Paul refers to the gurney as a "cot." When he cues the paramedics to lift the gurney into the ambulance, he yells "cot!" The players think that he says "cut!" and they all immediately stop what they're doing.

"‘Cot,’ not ‘cut!’" someone offers helpfully.

And that's a wrap.

For me and Eric, however, the day is not quite done. We drive over to the production office on Sunset Boulevard and pick up a package to deliver to Tobe. When we arrive at his home in Bel Air, both he and Carin are on the phone, so we play with the dogs for a while (five, count 'em, *five* wirehaired terriers).

When he's done with his phone call, Tobe comes out to the front room and sits with us for a few minutes. He seems calm and serene, and the three of us share a conversation about the events of the day, what he hopes to accomplish with this film, and the cast, Brad Dourif in particular. He tells us that Melinda Dillon has been cast as Nina, which strikes me as ideal, since as a performer she exemplifies both the strength and emotional fragility that the role demands. He also verifies that John Landis has agreed to play the part of the doomed radio technician. The role of the malevolent Dr. John Marsh is yet to be cast. Several wonderful actors have auditioned, but the choice is a difficult one for Tobe. Luckily, he still has some time to make his decision. I tell Tobe that I already can't wait to see this movie, and he nods in agreement.

It's getting late, so we say our goodbyes and head home for a restful night's sleep, anxiously looking forward to tomorrow.

Tuesday, February 28, 1989 - Day 2

Once again, we descend on John Marshall High. Eric and I arrive a bit late, but the crew is nowhere near ready to proceed.

The first setup of the day is meant to be a Steadicam shot, with Brad and Cynthia following the camera down two flights of stairs and a set of steps into a wide school corridor lined with, appropriately enough considering the film's fiery themes, glossy orange lockers. The walls are hung with brightly colored antinuke ("STOP Nuclear Power") and even

starker pronuke (“Support Trinidad Beach”) posters. The set is lit, and Levie and David Hayball are talking together, discussing the placement of bounce boards and diffusers.

The student extras for the day congregate in an adjacent hallway, waiting patiently, most immersed in lively conversation with one another.

Tobe and Brad pop onto the set for a quick moment for a progress report. 1st AD Paul tells them that we’re about ten minutes away from shooting, and they return to Brad’s trailer to prepare.

Steve Brooks and Levie are fascinated by a posted advertisement for Safeguard deodorant. It reads, “Only a geek would reek.” They riff on the rhyme scheme.

“Only a schmuck would fuck!” Steve proffers.

Half an hour goes by and we’re still no closer to shooting. The crew passes the time telling jokes. “What do director’s kids do after school? Go to the park and tell other kids how to play.”

There’s trouble in paradise. David is apparently having some sort of disagreement with location manager Seth Cirker. I don’t know the nature of the conflict, but I just overheard David saying, “Tell him not to ask *why*, just do his job!”

In the meantime, Tobe has returned to the set along with Brad and Cynthia. He choreographs the action of the scene with them. The dialogue is wall-to-wall, and especially important in establishing Sam and Lisa’s relative character traits. Lisa is a new age sort of girl, into crystals and “color-breathing” (whatever the hell that is), while Sam is dismissive of her fixation on the supernatural. He blames his perpetually high temperature for his bad behavior.

They rehearse with Steadicam operator John Nuler smoothly following the flow of the action.

A circuit breaker unexpectedly blows and all the lights suddenly go out. Best Boy electrician Johnny Cheshire scrambles to rejigger the connections and get the power up and running again.

I write compulsively in my journal. Steve Brooks keeps encouraging me to write things like, “Tobe says, ‘Steve Brooks is *the* FX genius of the ’90s!’”

More difficulties. The focus mechanism for the Steadicam is broken, so it might not be able to be used in the shot. It may be fixable, but the possibility is remote.

Levie explains to the Todd and the other grips that they're going to have to rethink the shot and asks them to start assembling the dolly track. They are understandably a little miffed, but swiftly go about their task with upbeat good humor.

Steve gives me a quick tutorial on the 35mm Panavision camera. It costs from \$250,000 to \$300,000 to manufacture but is not available to purchase. Panavision owns the patent on the technology and only rents or leases the equipment to production companies or independent filmmakers. Steve extols the virtues of a relatively new modification that allows the camera to capture images in almost complete darkness.

Eric and I have a discussion with Levie about the possibilities and capacity of nuclear power. Early in his career, Levie had been a broadcast news reporter (in fact, he is the radio voice reporting on the graveyard atrocities in Tobe's *TCM*) and tells us how he had been assigned to cover a tour of a fully-operational nuclear reactor in Bay City, Texas, which was abruptly canceled the day before it was scheduled because of the discovery that two of the power core rods were dangerously rubbing together. Levie is preemptively opposed to nuclear power as it is currently understood but makes a convincing argument for the future of nuclear *fusion* as a viable power source.

It's decided that we will move to the school parking lot to shoot the scene that was scratched from the schedule yesterday. It's 10:50 am, and not one frame of film has been exposed.

We're at the back of the school, in a common area that abuts the athletic field and parking lot. Today's grey skies contrast sharply with yesterday's amber sunshine. The camera dolly has been mounted on a long set of tracks that have been laid parallel to a chain link fence that runs the length of the adjoining walkway.

On a film crew, the grips are responsible for setting up, rigging, and dismantling lighting equipment and dolly tracks, as well as organizing and maintaining that equipment. They are the workhorses of the industry. Young Monty Spillers assists his boss, key grip Todd Griffith, in double-checking the mounts securing the Panaflex camera to the dolly. Monty is a young, mulleted skateboarder with an offhand demeanor and a friendly face that reminds me of 1930s street urchins the Dead End Kids.

The first shot of the scene is fairly straightforward. As students loiter, drift, or run to class, Brad trots down a broad, concrete stairway, strolls to the fence line, and stops short as he spies an unfamiliar figure futzing around the Studebaker parked some distance away in the lot. They shoot four takes, until Tobe gets just the look of confused curiosity that he wants from Brad.

The next shot is more complex. It's essentially a reverse travelling close-up of Brad as he walks slowly toward the parking lot, trying to unravel what it is that he's seeing. On the first take, Brad and the camera move together in near-perfect synchronization. They get the shot in two.

The camera stays on the dolly, but now swings around to view the parking lot, partially obscured by the fence's chain-link pattern. Levie sits on the dolly, his eye pressed against the viewfinder, as Todd pushes it steadily forward. In the shot, Sanford's 15-year-old son is featured bouncing a soccer ball against the fence. Brad steps into his own point of view (POV), pauses, then continues to the car. Off in the distance, Judith lingers surreptitiously at the driver's side door.

We have to wait for the school lunch bell to ring before another take can be done.

I've been watching Kat, the 2nd assistant director. She works wonderfully well with the extras, nudging them into place, making them feel an essential part of the project, laughing with them and encouraging them to act naturally. She obviously loves her job, and clearly this makes her good at it.

After the bell sounds, they go again. This time, Tobe rides the dolly as they roll while Levie and David saunter along beside him. Excellent take. "Print!"

I love how Brad calls Tobe "Boss" when asking for his cue.

Judith has been transformed by costume and makeup. In her floral vest, white blouse and matching hot pants, her hair tied back with a hunter green ribbon, she is all springtime and innocence. Tobe blocks the scene with her, directing her to act as if her character's behavior, basically breaking into Sam's car, amounts to nothing more sinister than dropping off a birthday gift. "It's been set up like, like it's...a surprise party!"

A technician from Panavision arrives. He and Levie go to check out the problem with the Steadicam to determine it can be used for the next scene.

The camera rolls, Paul shouts, “Background!” and a score of extras start acting like normal teenagers. As Jennifer, Judith circles Sam’s car carrying a bulky black plastic trash bag. She tries the driver’s door and, surprisingly, finds it unlocked. The camera dollies slowly forward. With a quick glance around, she removes from the trash bag a faded red hatbox with a white gift bow attached and leans into the car with it. [\[11\]](#)

Just then, Brad as Sam appears. “Boo!” he says.

We break for lunch at 12:45, still unsure as to the fate of the Steadicam.

The poor grip crew have had to lug the dolly from the common area to the corridor. It looks as though the Steadicam cannot be repaired, so track is being laid in the hallway. Pana-bummer.

I spent lunch in the costume trailer with Julia, musing about life. She told me about her exploits on other films, including James Cameron’s *The Terminator*, where she personally tie-dyed Linda Hamilton’s wardrobe. She said that she works so well and so often with Carin and Tobe because it feels as if they are a kind of family. Nothing pleases Julia more than making them happy. (She also makes beautiful jewelry. As a matter of fact, in the film Cynthia wears on her coat a starburst broach that Julia designed.)

It so happens that the tail end of the scene is shot first. The camera dollies back as Brad and Cynthia, arm in arm, come around the corner from the stairwell and flit down the tile steps into the corridor, where they play their dialogue. Then, as Brad moves out of frame, the camera moves in slowly for another beauty shot of Cynthia. Levie and David have outdone themselves with the lighting. The shot is gorgeous.

Headphones on, Tobe is intensely focused. He has an incredible eye for detail, seems to know exactly what he wants, and so far never misses a trick.

The next take does not go well. Some technical glitch. On take 3, Brad trips over the dolly track and giggles hysterically. Tobe pulls Cynthia to the side and has a short, private conference with her. I have no idea what was discussed, but afterwards the scene takes on a new life. They print takes 5 and 6, then it’s time to move on.

It looks like the problem has been resolved and the Steadicam will be used after all.

Despite the earlier run-throughs, it takes quite a while to get ready for the Steadicam shots. Brian Bernstein, the 2nd AC (sporting a hot pink

baseball cap), will have to spot John Nuler as he backs down the stairs, while Bill Roberts spots Brian. The actors are fitted with microphones to enable freedom of movement, so sound mixer Craig Felberg, who usually gets to sit comfortably behind his sound cart far beyond the fray while boom operator Cameron Hamza records dialogue on the set, must carry a portable mixing board and stay in close proximity to the action in order to do his job.

Craig can only accurately be described as “a fun-loving guy” while ridiculously good-looking Cameron gets deferred to like a matinee idol by all the women on the set.

Finally ready to go at 4:30 pm. Tobe, Brian, Bill, Craig, clapper/loader Monica Silvera, and script supervisor Nancy swarm around the camera. Monica slates the shot, then scurries off. Near the end of the first take, everybody practically falls all over one another.

“That was really *almost* great!” says Paul. “Let’s go again.”

They shoot the entire scene from beginning to end several times. Battling lens flares, focus issues, and flubbed lines, they persist until they get a clean take.

“Best one yet,” says Nuler.

A wood-framed, color-coded map of the world has been erected just down the hall, the site of the next setup. It is the same world map that Eric and I saw unfinished in Saugus a few short days ago.

In this long scene, Sam and Lisa encounter Milton Springer, a fellow teacher and apparently Sam’s nemesis, in a busy hallway bustling with students. Although they are unfailingly polite to one another, there is an ill-concealed animosity between them. Springer is a proponent of nuclear power and the reopening of the power plant, to which Sam is vehemently opposed.

Springer is played by Tegan West. He’s comes off as the archetypal prep school nerd, complete with thick glasses, toothy grin, and plastic pocket protector. Jerry Lewis immediately springs to mind. He also wears a white pronuke armband. The map represents Springer’s glorification of nuclear energy. Judith is also in the scene, along with Mimi Wearn as Vicki, one of the characters from yesterday’s shoot in the auditorium. Incidentally, Mimi is also a production assistant (PA) on the show.

Tobe rehearses the scene with the actors and the camera crew while David works his magic with the lighting. The setups are complicated, but he and his team work remarkably fast, considering.

I overhear makeup man Bill Miller-Jones kidding, “It’ll be easy when Brad’s supposed to look pale. We’ll just take his makeup *off*!”

There is a hubbub in the hallway that brings Paul running. A school official, evidently part of the adult education program at John Marshall High, storms out of his classroom and confronts several of the background students about the noise level.

In all fairness, it has been a bit loud, but what can you expect with upward of fifty people, most of them teenagers, congregating in a comparatively small space?

The man is furious. And when Paul shows up, it only gets worse. He shouts in Paul’s face, rudely expressing his dissatisfaction with the presence of the film unit. For his part, Paul takes it all in stride, barely batting an eye. When the man seems to have vented his spleen, Paul calmly apologizes for any inconvenience and assures him that we will strive to keep the decibel level down.

Paul’s noncombative manner seems only to anger the man further. Clearly not appeased, he retreats to his room, vowing to write letters, “highly critical letters,” to the parties responsible for this unacceptable disruption.

Having admirably diffused a potentially explosive incident, Paul shrugs and walks away. However, he then proceeds to “shoosh” everybody in the hall every five minutes or so.

It’s 6:25 pm. I secrete myself among the extras standing by and try to be inconspicuous.

There is a scheduled company move on today’s call sheet.

David, making last minute tweaks to the lights, sardonically says, “If we get out of here at six am, it’s gonna be hard to get that night shot!”

A laugh riot.

About twenty minutes have passed and the scene is fully lit. Kat wrangles the many, many background extras effortlessly, engineering a convincing flow of students through the hallway.

They begin with a master shot.

Tobe is itching to begin. “Let’s shoot something!”

“What a novel idea,” says Julia, just passing through. And she is gone.

The first take is a bit slow. West blows a line, but his characterization is flawless. Tobe huddles briefly with the actors, then they go again right away. They do several takes in quick succession, each one better than the last. At the end of the scene, Springer lights up the map with a flourish.

David Hayball sidles up beside me and makes a snarky remark about my receding hairline.

When I respond, “Yeah, and I’m not self-conscious about it *at all!*” he favors me with classic comedy shtick: the slow, sidelong glance. Good times.

Second meal arrives at 8:00 pm. Pizza! Everybody eats on the run. Kat announces that the company move has been scratched. The scene will be rescheduled for another day.

The next take is wonderful. Brad and Tegan hit all the right notes, and Judith’s reading of Jennifer’s revelation that she knows Sam’s birth date is slightly creepy.

“How did you know that?” asks Lisa, “I thought it was top secret.” A nod to the script’s theme of secret government conspiracy?

Got the master in the can. Moving on to singles.

Springer’s close-up. The camera dollies in very tight as he pontificates.

Kat hands me tomorrow’s call sheet. We’re to converge on the location of Sam’s bungalow in Hollywood at 3:00 pm. Sound mixer Craig Felberg looks as if he might be asleep.

Next up, Judith’s close-up. There’s no plywood beneath the dolly, which probably means no camera movement. Brad, Cynthia, and Tegan all bunch together next to the camera to feed Judith her cues. One take, perfect.

[\[12\]](#)

I step outside for some air and bump into Steve Brooks and production assistant Darrel Green. Steve tells a story about working with special effects wizard Richard Edlund (*Star Wars*, *Raiders of The Lost Ark*), who apparently couldn’t remember his name. Darrel seems unduly impressed at Steve’s use of the word “montage.”

Steve dismisses tomorrow’s scheduled effects shots as “Too easy! A little tinfoil, a little flammable gel, and voila! Your finger’s on fire!” Back on the set, I see still photographer Eric Lasher attempting to sneak a candid photo of lead actor Brad Dourif, but Brad catches him out of the corner of his eye and mugs ferociously for the camera.

Last shot of the night. Slow push into Brad's close-up. There are definitely signs of fatigue from some of the crew. Cameron inadvertently lowers the boom mike into the shot. Brad seems to be having a little difficulty pronouncing the word "conflagration."

It's a wrap at 10:45 pm.

Dailies for the first day's shooting are scheduled for 1:00 pm tomorrow at Van de Meer Studios in Burbank. I make a note to call the production office tomorrow for directions.

On my way out, Steve Brooks corrals me and, apropos of nothing, shares a random thought. "Imagine," he says, "Ozzy Osbourne gone vegetarian, frantically biting the heads off broccoli." Good night, Steve.

It's 12:15 am. I'm at home winding down with the television on. Football great Dick Butkus is on *The Tonight Show*, promoting *Spontaneous Combustion*! Butkus has been cast as a military general in the 1950s period segment of Tobe's film, and here he is with Jay Leno, waving a copy of a promotional flier for the film, "Fire Facts," which features the logo for Project Samson Productions, a flaming variation on Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man." Weird.

I fall asleep with the TV on.

Wednesday, March 1, 1989 - Day 3

The site of the day's shooting is a modest dwelling on Orange Grove Avenue, a sleepy side street in Hollywood. The house is a cozy bungalow with a rich green lawn and meticulously trimmed hedges. Its grey-shingled roof slopes dramatically and the entryway is framed by elegant Tuscan columns.

Eric and I arrive at 4:00 pm. It turns out that dailies (the screening of footage shot on the previous day) are a closed-door affair, for the time-being at least. However, Tobe tells us that in the very near future we will be able to attend.

It's another overcast day. Dolly tracks have been laid in the street at a gentle angle to the house. Levie and his crew hover around the camera while Tobe and Brad huddle together, going over the particulars of the day's first shot. Brad wears a black leather motorcycle jacket. PAs and ADs and wardrobe personnel mill about in the street, waiting for the go-ahead.

I notice production coordinator Rochelle Goodrich raking leaves in the neighboring yard. She's filling in as atmosphere for the shot. Someone observes that the blue Chrysler parked at the curb next door is the same vehicle that was parked next to the Studebaker in the school lot, so it is removed and replaced in the shot with Tobe's sleek gunmetal grey Corvette.

Driving the Studebaker, Brad is meant to turn onto Orange Grove from an adjacent street, park in front of the house, and sit and listen to the radio.

The camera rolls and Tobe calls, "Action!"

A pick-up truck has somehow eluded the AD blocking the street and ruins the shot.

"Oh, fuck!" says Tobe, "Uh, cut it! Cut it, God damn it."

Brad pulls up in front of the house, but Tobe waves him through, saying, "We've cut, Brad. That car buggered up our shot."

Brad responds with a grin and a jolly "happy motoring" salute, and proceeds around the block.

Tobe is really interested in this being a stunning beauty shot of the vintage automobile.

The next take goes off without a hitch. Brad turns the corner while the camera dollies forward and pans with the car as it settles in front of the house. As Brad listens intently for a moment while script supervisor Nancy reads Dr. Person's dialogue, which is meant to be coming from the car's radio. Then Brad abruptly exits the car with the red hatbox under his arm and hurries to the front door.

Tobe calls, "Cut!" and Todd calls out, "Rochelle, hurry up, will ya? We don't have all night with those leaves!"

Bill Miller-Jones does a test makeup of Sam's burned finger on Brad's stand-in, Adriano, as Steve Brooks looks on approvingly.

I notice that assistant director Kat Morais has let her hair down. It looks nice. Yesterday she wore it piled up under a baseball cap.

Todd and his grips move the dolly tracks to a slightly offset angle closer to the parked Studebaker. Tobe watches Bill touch up Brad's finger bandage as Brad sits behind the wheel.

In this part of the scene, Sam reacts with shock and confusion upon hearing over the radio that an acquaintance of his has suffered a mysterious fiery death. "Amy? Spontaneous combustion?" He rubs his neck, snatches up the hatbox, bolts from the car, and dashes into the house to catch the rest of the broadcast.

The shot itself is sweet. It begins at the front of the car, peering through the windshield. Then the camera creeps slowly forward, panning in a delicate curve into a close-up on Brad through the driver's side window, finally booming up and racking focus as Brad scurries across the lawn. Two takes, no waiting.

Costume designer Carin Hooper escorts the two young actors cast as Sam's parents, Brian and Peggy, onto the set in full costume. They're here for wardrobe fittings since their scenes aren't scheduled until next week.

Brian Bremer is, like Cynthia Bain, an alumnus of *Pumpkinhead*. He is snappily dressed in a dapper pinstripe suit and looks much younger than his 22 years. Stacy Edwards wears a comely orange print dress and has the mien of a young Jackie Kennedy. I suggest to Eric that he try to get a photograph of Brad with his "parents."

The grips strike the equipment and prepare to move inside the house for the remainder of the day.

Scene 40 is up next. Sam gets steadily more anxious as he juggles numerous stressors, from the fresh revelation of Amy's demise to his increasingly futile attempts to reach Lisa to the perplexing hatbox mystery to a cloying phone call from his mentor Lewis Olander. In the unlit living room, Tobe and Brad run through this very long and complicated scene.

The role of Olander is another that has yet to be cast. Reportedly, James Karen has suggested William Prince, the veteran actor and former 1940s heartthrob probably best known for his role as the diffident corporate executive in Sidney Lumet's *Network*.

PA Sean Williams stands guard at the door, making sure that no unauthorized personnel are allowed to enter during rehearsal. The password is "hot pussy," courtesy of Producer Jim Rogers.

I have a lengthy conversation with 1st AC Doug. He complains about the level of chatter on the set, saying that he's used to sets where only the director speaks. Last night's near-constant rumble in the school hallway seems to have really bothered him.

In the living room, Levie is in command. He is a true Southern gentleman. With his Texas drawl and disarming manner, he inspires confidence in everyone around him. A simple polite request is all that's necessary for him to get what he needs. As a result, the lighting and camera placement proceeds with relative ease.

I run into Paul Moen coming out of the restroom. I tell him how much I admired his handling of the sticky situation of the night before, calming an irate teacher incensed about the noise level.

“Make sure you put that in the book!” he says as he races off.

The living room is tastefully furnished but in a state of disarray. Piles of moving boxes line the walls, because, according to the screenplay, Sam’s estranged wife Rachel has unilaterally sold the house. With all the grips, set dressers, and electrical crew, it’s also a tight squeeze.

David the gaffer has a sardonic approach to his work. “Just a minute, let me go kill somebody.”

Outside the living room windows, his crew has hoisted huge Klieg lights, which can be dimmed to replicate the setting sun as darkness falls on the scene.

Tobe’s copy of the script is heavily annotated. He carries it with him as he walks Brad through the scene, pausing often to refer to it or to work out a detailed bit of business. I notice that Tobe has a birthmark on his hand similar to Brad’s. He must have had Bill apply it sometime during the day. He also wears an antinuke armband.

At first brightly lit by the “sunlight” streaming through the window blinds, as day gives way to dusk, Brad switches on a floor lamp here, a table lamp there, re-illuminating the room in stages. In a way, it’s a reflection of the difficult task that Brad has in indicating Sam’s incrementally rising anger.

There are almost too many setups to count, including quite a few sweeping dolly shots—tough to achieve in a relatively cramped space. After innumerable takes, we break for lunch at 9:00 pm.

During lunch, Tobe sends his assistant Rita to retrieve a saber-tooth tiger skull for placement in the scene. Also, I’m told by a reliable source that the driver of the pick-up truck that spoiled the first take of the day is Brad’s stunt double. Oops.

Brad is the first person to return to the set. He rehearses the scene alone in the empty house.

The first setup after lunch is a wide shot that resolves into a close-up. Brad plays the whole scene from beginning to end nonstop, with many long, thoughtful pauses and searching looks.

Tobe is happy. “Cut! Good one!”

I watch from the dining room. Craig the sound mixer lends me a pair of headphones so I can listen in as the dialogue is recorded. He considers sound recording an art and offers me a crash course. He makes constant tiny adjustments on the mixing board while recording, modulating the sound to enhance the performance. It’s fascinating, but the nuances escape me.

Co-producer Jerry Lambert takes my headphones for himself but gives them back almost immediately. Listening through the headphones allows me to appreciate the nuances of the actor’s vocal performances, lending me an entirely new perspective on the craft of film acting. I find it interesting that Brad relies on Craig to capture the subtleties in his voice, but they rarely interact directly.

Script supervisor Nancy Karlin reads the off-screen lines for Brad. Nancy is a sweet lady, but some find her voice a little abrasive.

Cameron says, with obvious affection, “She should narrate commercials...for *toxic waste*!”

The next setup is a dramatic low-angle shot with Brad on the phone, looming above the camera. After four takes, it’s just not working for Brad.

Tobe’s not happy either. “The eyes, the eyes,” he says. “I’ll throw the scene away if I can’t get the eyes.”

They finally get a take that they can both live with and move on.

Brad’s powers of concentration are impressive. I’m gaining a lot of respect for the craft of film acting and the discipline it requires.

Levie and his team rally for a quick reset. It’s going to be a pick-up on Sam’s radio, with a slow push in. The radio is a ruby red period replica and not coincidentally resembles a certain vintage automobile.

Pen wars with assistant director Kat and sound mixer Craig. “Where’s my pen? Who took my pen? Is that *my* pen?”

Paul’s voice floats in from the other room: “Let’s hold the talk back there!”

I spend a little time in the wardrobe trailer with photographer Eric Lasher and costume supervisor Julia Gombert trying to name all the villains from the *Batman* TV series in the ’60s. “Let’s see, The Joker, The Riddler, The Penguin, Catwoman, Louie the Lilac, King Tut, Mr. Freeze, Egghead, The Archer, and...don’t tell me, it’s right on the tip of my tongue.”

They also reminisce about working together on *TCM2* in Austin, Texas.

It's nearly 1:00 am and raining outside. I introduce myself to production assistant Robinson Miller. I've seen him around, but we haven't spoken. He seems like a nice enough boy. The quiet type, and serious about his work.

When I return to the set, Brad is facing the fireplace with the camera high behind him. This shot will be the first element of a sequence in the script that we've been calling "Sam's DNA Experience." As they roll, Brad lights the fire and slowly sits back as the camera floats past him, diving into the writhing curtain of flame, gazing for a long, tense moment.

When Tobe says "Cut," there is an audible sigh of relief from the crew.

Brad goes to the makeup trailer to prepare for his burning finger gag. While he's there, a homeless person wanders in and refuses to leave. Makeup man Bill Miller-Jones is forced to physically eject him. Ah, show biz.

Second meal at about 3:30 am. Fatburger! In the back yard, PA Sean emerges victorious in a rowdy game of pitching pennies.

Virtually everyone is inside the house now to avoid the drizzling rain. As the night drags on, some folks get a little punchy. The conversation somehow turns to romance and the late hour.

"Nobody's ugly after two am," quips Levie.

Tobe reminds his assistant Rita to return the saber-tooth skull to the car.

Next up is a tight reverse on Brad staring into the fire. Pyrotechnic effects supervisor Guy Faria stands by to ignite Brad's finger. David manipulates Mylar fringe to reflect shimmering light into Brad's eyes. Steve Brooks is also on hand to advise.

Tobe loves the shot. "Guys, this is beautiful."

Levie whispers, "I can see the fire in his eyes."

It's very quiet. Brad's breathing is ragged, and he drips with sweat as he loses himself in the dancing flames. He is mesmerized, murmuring, "Burning...burning..." Suddenly, he convulses and realizes that his finger is ablaze. He snaps abruptly from his reverie and rushes out of frame.

"Got it? Great! Print that."

"I liked that one," exclaims Brad, "It had something that surprised even *me!*"

UPM Sanford Hampton regales Eric and me with hilarious tales of his celebrity encounters. He takes special delight in trashing Orson Welles ("a *wretched* human being.") and Bette Davis ("Shriveled up old *cunt!* I thought one night she was gonna *die on film!*"). To be fair, he also talks

about people he likes, like actor Stacy Keach, with whom he also worked alongside Welles on the laughable Pia Zadora vehicle *Butterfly*.

I really enjoy watching Eric do his job. He has a very keen eye. He's an excellent photographer and his results are often striking and unexpected.

It's 4:50 am. Still one brief scene left to be shot. Scene 44: in the bathroom sink, Sam applies salve and a bandage to his scorched finger, then stares at himself in the mirror. While some of the crew work on setting the shot, the rest busy themselves striking the equipment that's no longer needed.

Tobe composes the shot so that when Brad turns to look in the mirror, he braces himself on one elbow, merging with his reflection and forming a sort of "Rorschach" image. Two takes and out.

It's a wrap at 5:30 am. I'm very tired.

Thursday, March 2, 1989 - Day 4

It's cold and misty in Malibu.

As Eric and I drive along the Pacific Coast Highway, we are treated to a glorious view of the magnificent hilltop mansion that will serve as the location for today's night shoot.

Our caravan of film trailers is arranged in a straight line on the muddy road at the base of Winding Way Road, just west of Sunset Boulevard. We arrive at about 7:00 pm, well after the crew call, but since the lighting plot is so complicated the speculation is that we won't get a shot off for several more hours. Everybody is bundled up tight in parkas and rain gear.

I first happen on Julia, who tells me that one of the transportation guys ran over the camera(!). Speaking of which, "Buffalo" Bob Lang is our appropriately nicknamed transportation captain. Thick-necked and shaggy, he's also about as easygoing a man as you'd ever care to meet. He's responsible for the reliability and maintenance of all the vehicles on the production; the grip and electric trucks, wardrobe and cast trailers, mobile restroom (traditionally known as the "Honeywagon"), show cars, and perhaps most importantly, Sam's Studebaker.

We visit the makeup trailer to watch as Steve Neill applies several prosthetic pieces to Brad's arm, face, and neck. Tonight's scenes take place late in action of the film, after Sam has endured substantial bodily upheaval. Flames have sprouted from his forearm, his neck has been pierced with

fiery jets, and his right eye has exploded in a fireball and swollen over. Also, his birthmark has grown to twice its original size.

As he works, Steve mumbles, “Now, *that’s* disgusting.” Perhaps fittingly, the Broadway cast recording of *The Phantom of The Opera* provides background music.

Discussing his taste in films, Brad is apparently not a fan of horror movies. “I wouldn’t see this movie,” he avers.

Today’s call sheet features this breathless injunction: “Don’t miss *The Hell Canyon Outlaws*, starring Denver Pyle, Rory Calhoun, Slim Pickens, and *David Hayball as ‘Betty!’*”

Up the hillside, the mansion gleams like a jewel in the night sky. Eric remarks that it reminds him of Xanadu in *Citizen Kane*. The process of lighting the opulent home continues deliberately but with considerable progress. This establishing shot is essential, and it is David’s moment to shine.

While getting a hot snack, I slip and fall in front of the catering truck, but luckily Nog is there to save my ass. I still wind up with a handful of mud, though.

In his rain slicker and cap, Paul Moen looks like the *Old Spice* guy.

Eric spies Tobe, wrapped warmly in a dark pea coat, black scarf, and knit cap, and tries to engage him in conversation, but Tobe is distracted, telling Eric, “Literally it’s costing \$4500 to talk to you right now.”

As Bill Miller-Jones takes over to apply base makeup to Brad, Steve and I gab about his work for Roger Corman, B-movies in general, and his current passion: remote-controlled (RC) model airplanes. With his long hair, open face, and mellow manner, he could easily be mistaken for a much more laid-back Ozzy Osbourne.

Steve resumes his work on Brad, blackening his eye and his mouth with soot and ash, chapping his lips, and applying a repulsive yellow-green ooze to his arm wound. I see actress Melinda Dillon in the flesh for the first time. She’s here to meet with Carin about her wardrobe. She looks vibrant and fit, but Carin later tells me that she had described herself as “fat,” which strikes me as absurd.

We break for lunch at 10:30 without getting a shot off.

Finally ready to shoot at 11:40 pm. The first shot consists of the Studebaker, driven by Brad’s stunt double Monty Cox in a fright wig, pulling up to the mansion’s driveway and waiting as the security guard

swings open the heavy wrought iron gate, then rolling up to the guard shack.

Steve Brooks is running a second camera in order to capture a beauty shot of the house for optical insertion of a star field. I sneak a peek through the viewfinder. It's gorgeous.

Once the shot is in the can, Eric approaches Richard Warlock, the actor playing the guard ("Kindly ol' Mr. Fitzpatrick") and asks if it's okay to snap a few pictures of him.

Warlock says, "Do you want me in character?" and shockingly removes his dentures(!), revealing a wide, toothless grin.

Next up is a shot from inside the car. Monty will drive, basically performing the same action as the previous shot, with Levie on the seat beside him, operating the camera handheld. Instead of running the engine, the car is pushed up the drive by eight members of the crew. They get it in one.

Then, with the car remaining stationary, Levie slides over to the driver's seat to shoot the exchange with the guard from Sam's POV.

The first take is excellent. Tobe calls for a second take for safety; they end up doing five or six. Warlock is word-perfect every time, but his face is occasionally blocked by his own arm or by the doorframe of the car. Tobe is very sensitive to any distracting shadows in the background.

David shouts up toward the house, "Anybody moving around up there is *evil!*"

Tony Hooper, clad in coveralls and with his long hair pulled back in a ponytail, waits for his turn as a paramedic in an upcoming shot. Apparently his car broke down earlier today and he's not at all happy about it.

The night is crystal clear, breezy and biting cold. Craig helpfully gives me a lesson on the merits of the windscreen microphone, which is a must on a night like this.

I meet with the owners of the splendid house, an outwardly charming married couple who seem strangely delighted with the presence of a film crew on their property.

"We're happy to have you. You're artists!" says the husband.

I can't help but wonder, perhaps cynically, what the fee is for use of the location.

They're ready to shoot Tony's big scene. An ambulance idles at the foot of the driveway. Three police cruisers occupy the winding cobblestone path,

lights flashing. Tony ambles up to the ambulance, hops in, and it speeds off. They rehearse on film and get it in one take.

Second meal at 4:00 am. Jack In The Box! Breakfast Jacks and hash browns.

Tobe meets with Julia to inspect Brad in his late-stage wardrobe. His outfit has been artfully distressed. His shirt is charred and filthy with ash, his pants are ripped and torn, and his jacket sleeve is thoroughly tattered and hanging in shreds. Julia explains that they even tried to melt the shirt buttons, but they simply shattered instead.

In his shocking makeup and ragged clothing, Brad draws gawking admiration from the assembled crew.

“You should see the *other* guy!” he says.

Steve does last-minute touch-ups before they roll on the next shot.

Assistant cameraman Brian Bernstein affixes a wide-angle lens to the camera, set low to the ground. Brad’s shambling shape fills the foreground, then recedes into the distance as he hobbles up the paved drive, limping painfully and dragging his useless leg behind him as the foreboding mansion towers above.

Tobe demonstrates for Brad the kind of unsteady lope that he’d like to see. It calls to mind Charles Laughton’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. They settle on a kind of awkward shuffle and hop.

We return to the Studebaker to shoot Sam’s violent confrontation with the guard. It’s a fascinating little scene, with Sam struggling against excruciating pain and conflicting emotions. When Fitzpatrick lurches at him, something snaps inside, and Sam discharges a brutal heat storm that throws the guard to the ground and sets him ablaze.

Brad had earlier expressed concern about a lighted mouthpiece that he is meant to wear for this scene (ostensibly to give the impression of a fire within), worried that it would likely muffle his diction and necessitate rerecording the dialogue at a later date. Tobe had proposed that they shoot both with and without it, but I think it makes Brad uncomfortable. He grudgingly agrees to try it both ways.

The FX crew is using an air mortar to produce a huge blast of hot air as a manifestation of Sam’s rage. The first time it goes off, it scares the hell out of me!

Winding down after his last shot, Brad is humorously self-deprecating about his talent, referring to himself as “the biggest rip-off artist,” and

joking, “If you think I can act, okay, I’ll take your money!”

Irresistibly likeable, Sean Williams is shaping up to be the man of a thousand uses. Tonight alone, he’s been saddled with the duties of a grip, an electrician, and a driver, in addition to his own responsibilities as a PA. I’ve also observed that, despite the rain and the wind and the cold, not a grumble was to be heard from anyone all through the night.

Fighting the sun for the final shot: the security guard’s body bursts into flames. I’m skeptical of the dummy being used, which looks to me like a discarded dime-store mannequin, but I receive assurances that it’ll be fine. There is a slight delay when the headlights in the Studebaker refuse to work. Because of the encroaching morning light, Levie adjusts the camera’s F-stop (whatever that means). Also, they wisely shoot with two cameras to save time.

Guy Faria sets explosive charges and stuffs flash paper into the collar and waistband of the artificial guard. For this first real pyrotechnic effect of the shoot, I anticipate a raging fireball, but when the cameras roll the dummy erupts with only an unconvincing POOF! and a wispy cloud of smoke.

Underwhelmed, Tobe says, “Uh, okay.”

It’s 6:30 am, and that’s a wrap.

I sit and watch the sun come up over the ocean as assistant cameraman Doug Adams makes a beeline for the camera truck, saying “Move or bleed!”

As Steve Neill removes Brad’s makeup, the power in the trailer abruptly quits. Gregg the driver investigates, discovering a melted cable, charred and still fizzing, which must have shorted out the generator. He calculates that the failure must have occurred just as Brad was absorbed in smoldering fury. Spooky.

Eric and I pull onto PCH at 7:00 am, the sound of the ocean waves lapping at our heels.

Altadena is a quaint Los Angeles suburb resting at the foot of Mount Wilson, site of the world-renowned observatory. It’s hard to put my finger on it, but there’s something reassuringly familiar about the place.

An appealing little cottage on a tree-lined street has been chosen as the location for the exterior of Nina’s home. The interiors will be shot on stage at a later date. David and his team have been working for hours to light the scene, and their efforts have paid off handsomely. The house is bathed in a

soft yellow glow, with lacy chiaroscuro shadows falling across the façade. Evergreen trees bend their leaves protectively over the roof.

Practically the whole of the company is standing in the street. It's another chilly night, so there is no shortage of fleece jackets, gloves, and knitted caps. Folks stamp their feet and clap their hands to get warm.

The camera has been mounted on a crane and Tobe is checking the viewfinder to set the shot. He cranks the camera wheels to adjust the angle, operating like a pro. The shot being prepared will serve as an establishing shot and will also further the action, starting high in the air and descending as Brad pulls the trusty Studebaker to the curb in front of the house.

I pay a visit to the wardrobe trailer and am introduced to Jon Cypher, who has been cast as the invidious Dr. John Marsh. He's probably best known for his role as the unpredictable police captain in *Hill Street Blues*, but what is not such common knowledge is that in the 1960s he co-starred as Prince Charming in a television production of the musical *Cinderella* alongside Julie Andrews. I tell him that I saw him onstage as Juan Peron in *Evita* twice, for which he thanks me and says that he loved doing it. Cypher is tall and imposing. He cuts quite a figure in the well-tailored suit that Carin is fitting to his lean frame.

A new grip has been added to the crew. Marcus "Roo" Flowers is a baby-faced, slightly chubby jokester with a helmet of blond hair. His father is character actor "Buck" Flowers, a friend of Tobe's who will lend his talents to the film as a raving, gravel-voiced radio preacher.

Levie has taken his seat up high on the crane and is raring to go. He wears fingerless mittens and is bundled up in a blue hooded parka with a furniture pad across his lap to ward off the cold.

At 11:30 pm, Paul calls for quiet and they go for a take. The camera falls gracefully and settles on Brad just as the car comes to a halt.

"Give a little look-out, Brad. This way," says Tobe, waving a black-gloved hand to give him his eyeline. "Now look back at the house. Cut!"

Excellent take.

Paul oversees the set with martial confidence. With his close-cropped beard and clear voice, he seems the archetypical 1st AD, stern but fair. He's performed the same function on several films, including *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark*, one of my favorite guilty pleasures.

The car was chugging a bit rough at the top of that first take. I hope the engine holds out.

Gaffer David Hayball and key grip Todd Griffith have a cheerily antagonistic relationship. I catch David pointing back and forth between Todd and a sandbag, intoning, “Sandbag, *dirtbag*, sandbag, *dirtbag*!”

Lisa’s arrival at Nina’s house is up next. On the porch, Tobe walks Cynthia through her action. He rings the doorbell, waits a moment, and then leads her around the corner to the side of the house. Unexpectedly, the resident of the home answers the door and Tobe comes quickly back, grinning and saying sheepishly, “Um, that was a mistake, sir.”

The next shot is a beauty. The setup is similar to the first. The camera starts high and drops languidly as Cynthia pulls up in Lisa’s shiny black convertible, then rises as she gets out of the car and climbs the low cement steps to the front door.^[13] They shoot four lengthy takes. Unfortunately, in driving up to the curb, Cynthia misses her mark on the first two. In-between each take, Tobe makes little adjustments to Cynthia’s performance.

Ironically, although the scene is meant to take place on a balmy late-summer evening, it’s freezing cold. My feet are like ice.

The upcoming shot reveals Marsh’s skulking presence as an agitated Sam dashes away from Nina’s place. Marsh is to be played by stunt coordinator Greg Gault, since Cypher is not yet officially contracted to play the role, his casting having only been finalized earlier today. In his dark trench coat and black leather gloves, Greg is the embodiment of the stereotypical covert operative.

But the shot will have to wait. It’s 1:30 am and time for lunch.

The wardrobe trailer being the warmest place in the vicinity, Carin and Julia set up an ironing board as a dining table.

I have a long talk with Tony about film favorites and past and future projects. He’s quite like his dad in many ways, not so much in others—immensely talented and intelligent, but often shy and socially awkward with new acquaintances.

Snippets of conversation overheard during lunch:

David Hayball, “I may not be the *best* gaffer around, but I’m certainly the *cheapest*!”

Steve Brooks, “Ah, visual effects. The art of standing around while the crew wanks off!”

As I return to the set, I see a shooting star streak across the sky. A positive omen? Or a harbinger of doom?

The camera crane is really just a counter-balanced lever (or “jib”) attached to a fulcrum, and operates according to the basic laws of physics, i.e., pull down to lift, release to lower. At any rate, they’re definitely getting their money’s worth with it tonight. It figures prominently in the next setup as well.

The shot begins high and wide. Brad runs from the house to the car and speeds away. The camera sinks to street level to discover Marsh’s obscure form lurking in the foreground, then rises again as he furtively crosses the road and trots up the steps. Greg is wonderfully murky as Marsh, especially considering that he has no reference of Jon Cypher on which to base his physicality.

Co-producer Jerry Lambert has been playing a quirky little game with me. He approaches me as if to say something, but, apparently thinking better of it, walks away.

The grips lay dolly track across the lawn as the camera crew shoots a close-up on Brad in the car. Tobe discusses the geometry of the shot with Levie before they roll. two quick takes and out.

“We got a new deal goin’ here,” David says, and directs best boy Johnny Cheshire where to reset the lights.

I overhear Levie telling Tobe what a great experience this has been for him so far and how much he appreciates the opportunity.

Since the shot of Cynthia coming up the walk went on so long, Tobe has come up with an idea for an insert on her shadow slithering up the steps as her heels click on the pavement. “A real bonus!” he mutters.

In his assignment as still photographer, Eric is sent out to photograph a two block stretch of the surrounding streets to be used later as source material for a “poor man’s process,” a gimmick that creates the illusion of movement in a motionless vehicle.

Under Paul’s supervision, a parade of cars comprising the film’s 2nd unit departs the location in order to film the Studebaker as it races through the city streets.

The tracks have been laid in the grass to run along the side of the house. While planning the move, Tobe rides the dolly while standing. Before they roll, Tobe instructs Cynthia to move slowly so the camera can chase ahead of her. They manage very quickly to get a long sweeping shot of her as she rounds the corner and looks around warily.

The sky starts to pale. It’s a race to get the last shot before the sun rises.

Braced with cinder blocks, plywood planks have been placed across the steps and the dolly placed on the planks. Though tired, everybody moves with urgency. When Tobe whispers, “Action,” Brad exits the Studebaker and, looking directly into the camera, walks up the steps as the dolly retreats. Roo moves in tandem with the camera, wielding a flag to prevent lens flares. “Okay, let’s go again, straight away.” They shoot three takes and print two of them, just as a ray of sunlight escapes from below the horizon.

Looking back at the house, I hadn’t realized until now how very close the mountains are. They’re practically on top of us.

It’s a wrap at 6:00 am, which marks the end of a very long week.

Sunday, March 5, 1989

Tony Hooper pays a visit to Eric’s house, bringing along a videotape of his father’s little-seen (and mostly unheard of) first feature film, *Eggshells*. Made in 1968, it’s a surprisingly sophisticated hippie ghost story, with dozens of stylistic flourishes the likes of which I’d never seen before. The cinematography is quite beautiful, with a semi-documentary style that prefigures *TCM*. It’s also a fascinating window on the ’60s, with its mod fashions and socially aware political climate.

What a treat.

WEEK TWO

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Monday, March 6, 1989 - Day 6

The Lindsey Stage in Valencia holds a selection of permanent sets designed to represent a variety of common locations often used in film and television production, e.g., courtroom, diner, emergency room, hospital rooms, and all-purpose corridors. This is the company's scheduled home for the next few days.

After running errands all morning and into the early afternoon, Eric and I arrive at the stage at about 2:00 pm. Kat, our cheerful assistant director, greets me almost immediately upon entering and provides me with copies of script changes for today's shooting. These alterations are in part intended to clarify the role that Judith Jones' character plays in the film's internecine conspiracy plot, the screenplay being rather vague on the point. I discover from the new pages that the character's full name is Jennifer Strikes. Is this arbitrary or a clever allusion? Does she "strike" the match that starts the fire?

Eric and I commandeer a small makeup room for use as our "office," putting a handwritten sign on the door that reads: "Documentary Team—Knock twice, then go away!"

Steve Brooks is hanging out, trying to look important. Though he often reminds me of a naughty boy, Steve is fiercely intelligent, completely unpretentious, and great fun to work with.

Today's first scene takes place in a hospital waiting room. Tobe sits on the set with Jon Cypher and Cynthia and together they dissect the scene. Tobe's script bulges with multicolored pages, paper tabs, and Post-it notes. Cypher questions the necessity of a hospital badge, suggesting that it would be below his character's station. Tobe agrees and the idea is dispensed with.

The crew seems well rested after two days off. Second assistant cameraman Brian Bernstein has clearly gotten himself some sun, showing off a rich tan.

In the day's first shot, Marsh brusquely guides Lisa down the hallway and into the waiting room. Assorted extras are placed randomly throughout the hall, variously dressed in street clothes, surgical scrubs, or hospital gowns. The camera is on the dolly. To aid in noise reduction, Todd has placed Masonite boards beneath it. On the first take, everything goes precisely as planned. They quickly shoot another for safety and are ready to move into the waiting room.

Shooting on a soundstage is a world apart from shooting on location. For one thing, you have little sensation of the passage of time. There is also the disorienting contrast of the low, constant hum of voices and the clatter of work to the complete and utter silence when cameras roll.

To call for quiet on a soundstage, usually a bell is rung. Unwisely, Paul has left Craig in charge of the bell, and he gleefully abuses this authority at every opportunity. Craig also seems to derive great pleasure from needling Nancy, pushing her buttons constantly by purloining her belongings and mocking her thick Brooklyn accent, among other things.

Things are moving swiftly. The waiting room is lit predominantly in cool blues and pale greens, according to the detailed color scheme that Tobe and Levie have conceived. Rather than lighting through the actual windows, a freestanding rig of slatted blinds has been set up to create a moody, film noir effect.

Tobe has another lengthy conference with Cynthia and Jon before shooting begins. It's a long scene with lots of complex dialogue, structured as an elegant game of cat and mouse, so it's important that they hit all the right beats. Marsh's attempt to calm Lisa and divert her attention from Sam's inexplicable "illness" is really a thinly veiled effort to unearth what she knows. Lisa distrusts him and grows increasingly anxious as he continues to prod.

The first setup is a truly lovely close-up on Cynthia. Due to the emotion of the scene, her eyes are a crystalline, watery blue. Her performance is very delicate, veering gently between confusion and distraction and culminating in a burst of anger.

Cynthia does wonderfully well on the first take. On the second, Jon flubs his off camera lines and is reduced to hysterical laughter. "I'm

curious...uh, I'm so curious...um, I don't know *what* I'm curious about! Hahahahaha...!"

Camera reload.

The tiny room is especially cramped. Tobe has to squeeze by Levie before and after every take. I notice that wherever Tobe is, Rita is always nearby with his favorite beverage handy: Dr. Pepper, brewed and packaged in the Lone Star State.

Todd lays on a gurney in the hallway. His whole body rattles whenever the bell goes off. It's been explained to me (by someone who shall remain nameless) that Todd is the key grip only because he is the rudest of all the grips, a qualification that apparently assures career advancement.

Cynthia asks Eric not to photograph the next take, a request he grants without argument.

Upstairs, about two dozen extras are assembled in a holding room: doctors, nurses, interns, paramedics, cops, civilians, and patients in various stages of incapacity, all biding their time as they wait to be called to the set. It'll be at least another hour. It's 4:50 pm and time for lunch.

I have a chat with David Hayball. At only 36 years old, he's irrationally preoccupied with the prospect of going grey. I have trouble sympathizing. *I* should have such a great head of hair. He also tells me that when he was in the Boy Scouts as a youngster, a kid that he knew was struck by lightning and killed. Ever since then, he says, he considers every day of his life to be "gravy."

When we get back from lunch, they're ready to shoot the single on Jon Cypher. As Marsh, Cypher is fastidiously groomed and has a certain reptilian quality about him. Cypher's oily performance gets better and better with each take, although he continues to have a problem with Olander's name. He keeps pronouncing it "Orlander."

The last setup of the scene is a low shot favoring the room's wall-mounted television set, which plays back footage that was shot the week before of paramedics retrieving a body outside the radio station. Steve Brooks runs the camera for the final take. He is stylishly draped in light green scrubs, being scheduled to play an orderly in an upcoming scene.

For the last shot of this sequence the camera is back in the hallway, duplicating the first setup, only this time Cynthia rushes from the room and down the corridor with Cypher fast behind her. There is an issue when one

of the extras blocks Cynthia, but it is soon resolved and they get the shot with ease.

The crew moves across the stage to the prefabricated emergency room set for the next sequence.

While waiting for David and his team to light the set, I do a pencil drawing of production assistant Sean Williams in my sketchbook. I brought the book to the set hoping to get the cast and crew to contribute to it. Also, at Kat's request, I do a quick cartoon of a guy with his head on fire on tomorrow's call sheet.

I meet up with Brad Dourif at the craft services table and we get to talking. I have a particular interest in his role in David Lynch's *Dune*. He shares with me some terrific insights into the malicious mind of Mentat Piter De Vries and explains his thinking behind the character's elaborate use of an invented sign language in the film. When I offer my condolences on the recent passing of great Irish character actor Kenneth McMillan, who had appeared with him in both *Dune* and Milos Forman's *Ragtime*, he is taken aback, evidently not having heard about his death.

The ER is populated thick with extras. The art department just barely finishes dressing the set before the camera crew arrives. Paint is still drying on the walls when they roll.

In this chaotic scene, Sam grimaces and roars in agony, his smoldering arm wrapped in a soiled towel, as Lisa practically drags him into the emergency room, pleading for help and shouting one of my favorite loopy lines from the screenplay: "He had fire *coming out of his arm!*" It's a high-energy moment, and confusion abounds.

While rehearsing the scene, Tobe has the room cleared of all extraneous personnel.

Brad demonstrates his wavering swoon for Tobe, explaining that "every time *I* pass out, I just wanna find some place to sit!" which leads me to wonder if it's a common occurrence.

I also notice that, in their tan slacks and beige shirts, Tobe, Levie, and Brad all appear to be wearing the same outfit.

Guy Faria and his assistant, gentle giant Duncan Puett, have rigged Brad's arm to smoke using a contraption assembled from assorted tubing and a hand pump. After only a few takes, the room is swimming with smoke, and many are coughing or rubbing their eyes.

Jerry Lambert sits on the sidelines. Craig gets my attention, cocks his thumb at him, and holds up a card on which he's scrawled, "Where'd they find this guy?" In fact, Jerry had collaborated with Tobe on the score for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*.

Tobe likes a restless camera. In this setup, it does a fast dolly roll, following Cynthia's desperate scamper to the reception window, and then a matching retreat as she zips back to Brad's side.

Each time before the camera rolls, Brad prepares himself by hyperventilating, gulping air and expunging it in short, husky wheezes.

During one take, orderly Steve Brooks, wielding a fire extinguisher to put out Brad's simmering arm, inadvertently blasts one of the extras. Another one of the background players, a sweet older lady, comes up to Levie and timidly asks if she can look through the camera lens. Always genial, he gestures extravagantly that she may, and she is delighted.

Just as the scene is really coming together, they are forced to stop. One minute, the crew is charged up and barreling headlong through the scene, the next minute Paul is calling it a wrap. I learn that the Lindsey Stage has strict time limitations and that there is to be no shooting past midnight. Even ten minutes over the allotted time would result in a considerable penalty.

Steve Neill is here to remove Brad's cauterized arm makeup, frustrated that it wasn't even seen, having been hidden under a towel the whole time. On the plus side, he brings along a video test of his designs for the charred remains of Sam's parents. In the video, an anonymous hand plunges a sharpened pencil into a bloated black head, digs around a bit, and finally extracts an ashen shrunken skull. There are "oohs" and "ahhs" from those gathered around the monitor.

As everybody packs up to leave, Craig serenades us with his off-key and off-color rendition of the song standard "Try to Remember": "Try to remember / the size of my member / and swallow / swallow, swallow, swallow..."

Tuesday, March 7, 1989 - Day 7

Eric and I get to the soundstage at 1:00 pm to discover that stunt coordinator Greg Gault has taken over our office space for himself. So, we scout around and seize upon a judge's chambers in which to relocate.

I hear Rita's singsong voice echoing through the stage: "Yoo hoo! Tobe, are you there? Tobeeeee?"

The crew busily prepares for the day's activity. ACs Brian and Monica perform maintenance on the camera, checking its critical functions and cleaning dust and grit from the lens coupling. Set dresser Tim Keating and prop man Bill Roberts work as a team prepping the set for Marsh's examination room, a sunken surgical theater with sickly, green-tiled walls.

Unprompted, Craig selflessly sets up a radio receiver in our chambers so we can monitor the progress on the set and come running whenever they're ready to go.

A catchphrase is making the rounds: "Oh, man! Too baayaad!" said in a mock hillbilly dialect.

Eric has forgotten his blimp, an essential piece of equipment that muffles the sound of his camera shutter during filming, and must drive the thirty mile round trip home and back to retrieve it.

Before filming begins for the day, I take a short walk over to Stage 4 to check on the progress of the construction crew. Most of the sets are nearly complete, including the blast bunker and bomb shelter. Richard McGuire shows me the shelter mechanism, which will cause its steel beams to collapse and walls to rattle when the bomb explodes. We're scheduled to shoot in here first thing next week.

Back at the Lindsey stage, they're ready for the first shot of Scene 61, in which Dr. Marsh conducts a grim examination of Sam's condition following the ruckus in the ER. Steve Brooks reprises his scintillating role of "concerned orderly," rolling Brad in, curled up in a wheelchair with a distraught Cynthia at his side and Cypher following close.

Like many on the stage, the room is compact, making it far too easy to be underfoot. David politely asks me and several others to stay out, so I have to be content watching from an adjoining room, which just happens to be the set for the next scene. It's frustrating to be so far from the action, but others have much better reasons to be there than I do.

The first shot of the sequence requires an elaborate camera move. It starts high, and as the group enters from the adjacent corridor, the dolly rolls back as the camera simultaneously booms down, following them and revealing the antiseptic room in a wide arc, finally settling close on Brad's pale, agonized face.

Jon Cypher loves his props. He relishes snapping on his orange rubber gloves and strapping on his green-tinted goggles and grandly flourishing his alarming syringe. There's one particularly funny moment when Cypher blithely passes a Geiger-counter wand over Brad, who reacts with a priceless look of disbelief.

"What's that?" Brad asks.

"It's nothing, Sam," deadpans Cypher.

Brad's performance in his close-up is riveting. Every twitch, every glance, is precise yet spontaneous. To my eyes, it is a masterful demonstration of film acting.

Tobe expresses a concern about shadows in the shot and Levie good-naturedly shouts, "Everybody outta' *that* room!" referring to my observation perch. A few other gawkers and I dejectedly move out.

Luckily, Eric brings me periodic reports.

I chat with Craig, who is happily remote from the set, about his long, eclectic list of TV and movie credits, including *The Waltons*, several Charles Bronson vehicles, *Maniac Cop*, and Ken Russell's grimy and surreal *Crimes of Passion* (from which he shares some unrepeatable anecdotes about star Anthony Perkins). Craig is impish yet professional and always good for a laugh.

Production accountant Marc Kunis balks at revealing to me confidential information regarding the actor's salaries. With his coke-bottle glasses and willowy posture, he is the quintessential nerd, but I have to respect his integrity.

It's 4:15 pm and reportedly there is some tension on the set. When Eric offered an opinion about a particular setup, Todd brushed him off brusquely, telling him to "stay in your own department." It's hot and crowded in that confined space, which probably accounts for his short fuse.

Julia discovers that she has forgotten an article of clothing needed for the next scene and has to run to West Covina, some hundred miles round trip, to get it. Mortified, she tells Tobe, "Don't worry, I'll go *ninety miles an hour!*"

"Uh, *no*, don't do that. Be safe," he says in reply, "No shot's worth a life."

And that's lunch at 5:00 pm.

While eating, I catch a bit of Steve Brooks' conversation with Kat: "... but what I really want to do is *direct*."

At the end of the lunch break, they turn around for the reverse shot on Marsh. With his gangly body and long limbs, equipped with his Day-Glo gloves and bulging goggles, Cypher resembles a rarified insect poised to strike. In one take, he tears off his gloves with too much force, tearing one at the seams. Being the only pair on hand, Bill Roberts attempts a repair with some rubber glue. With a little cheat, they're able to use them in the next take.

Sound mixer Craig Felberg, commenting on production assistant Robinson Miller's wholesome good looks, volunteers that he should be a commercial model for C&R, a local discount clothing outlet known for their cheesy ads.

For the hell of it, Bill Miller-Jones is applying Sam's birthmark to Eric's hand.

Presumably as a sign of respect and solidarity, both Brad and Cynthia remain on set to feed Cypher his cues. I'm led to understand that this is relatively uncommon. More often in practice, the script supervisor reads the lines.

Steve Neill drops by to pick up the dummy that was used as the sizzling security guard in Malibu, intending to use it to mold some other prosthetics for the show, and is noticeably pleased with its surprising durability. In an unguarded moment, he commiserates with me about a bothersome legal dispute in which he's embroiled. "Mac Tonight," McDonald's crooning moon character, is Steve's design, but based on a dubious claim, both he and the franchise are being sued jointly for an astronomical sum. He tells me that the suit has no merit, but as a result, he's been avoiding subpoenas and dodging Marshalls for months.

The camera is now directed at a large, convex surveillance mirror mounted above the door between the exam room and Marsh's office. This represents Sam's warped POV as he eavesdrops on Marsh having a cryptic phone conversation. Cypher plays the scene with a combination of cool remove and exasperation.

The shot also marks the introduction of Dr. Cagney, Marsh's unctuous minion. Thirty-ish Michael Keys Hall has been cast in the role, who from my reading of the script I had taken to be a much older man. Eric and I had even speculated that *IFM*'s James Karen would be an ideal fit for the part, but Tobe seems to have gone another way. Cagney, in his white lab coat and

with his suspiciously affable disposition, comes off to me like a sinister dentist. He and Marsh whisper conspiratorially together.

“Cut!”

Midnight is fast approaching, but the producers have wisely negotiated an agreement with the owners of the stage to stay on past the deadline.

Nancy tells anyone who will listen that she got a speeding ticket on the way to work today.

They wheel the camera around to shoot Lisa’s frantic arrival to the examination room, with Marsh manhandling her as he streaks past. Cynthia seems tired, which is either a by-product of her emotional state in the scene or simply a reflection of the late hour. They shoot several takes in quick succession and she seems relieved when the shot is completed.

The last shot of the night is much anticipated: the gruesome reveal of Sam’s oozing volcanic arm wound. Paul doubles for Marsh, extending his hand into the frame as if to remove the pus-stained towel, but recoiling from it instead. The camera dollies into an excruciating close-up as Brad unfurls the towel and exposes the wound’s gaping maw. He flexes his forearm, causing it to pulsate. Between takes, Miller-Jones dabs at it with yellowish goo.

Tobe is all smiles as he watches, offering, “Yeah, that’s painful, very painful!”

Despite some minor focus issues, the shot comes off great. It’s wonderfully grotesque.

We wrap for the day at 2:30 am. In reviewing my journal, I see that I had written earlier, “Don’t forget Darrel’s ‘confabulum’ tale.” I have no idea what that means.

Wednesday, March 8, 1989 - Day 8

In the morning, I accompany photographer Eric Lasher to Canyon Country to drop off film for processing, but we get lost trying to find the lab and are significantly delayed. When we finally arrive to the stage after 2:00 pm, we discover Craig napping in our judge’s chambers.

Evidently Brad has had an allergic reaction to the effects makeup on his arm. By all accounts he tolerates the itch, but Steve Neill and Bill Miller-Jones resolve to reduce the amount of latex used in the application process to avoid any further discomfort.

In discussions with the crew, I find that many of them have frequently worked together on prior projects. New grip Marcus “Roo” Flowers giggles as he tells me a how he “swatted” transportation coordinator Lawrence Morgan during production on a film called *Relentless*, but withholds the details. Craig adds that he broke his foot on the same show, sparking mock speculation about a “curse” on the movie.

In the foyer, Brad waits to be called to the set, sitting quietly and reading a book entitled *The Artist as Channel*. I make a note to ask him about it.

On the set, they take up where they left off last night. In the scene, Cagney somewhat insincerely suggests that Sam “watch a little television” to take his mind off his troubles, and switches on a TV set mounted fortuitously on the wall behind him. In a tight close-up, Brad looks up at the set as the local news reports the grisly radio station death (the same report that Lisa and Marsh simultaneously watch in the waiting room, complete with file photo of an inappropriately grinning John Landis).

Out of the blue and for no apparent reason, Craig announces, “Put a zipper on that twatburger!”

Since I’m handy, Kat requests that I run the videotape player. My very important contribution to the scene consists of pressing “play” when Tobe calls “action.”

Brad emotes with his usual intensity, sweat dripping from his forehead and a thin stream of snot leaking from his nose. Nancy reads the reporter’s lines in her usual Bronx twang.

Nancy is diminutive (the bulky script she always carries with her is almost as big as she is) but feisty. Especially sensitive to Craig’s amusingly unrepentant rudeness, she has more than once threatened to walk off the set if he persists. Which is precisely the wrong approach, as it only encourages his efforts to get a rise out of her.

Craig whispers to me in an aside, “She still has to talk to me even if she doesn’t want to!”

In an annex just outside Marsh’s office, the camera is “on sticks,” i.e., mounted on a tripod, primed to shoot a close-up on Cagney. In the shot, he intently examines a vial of phosphorous liquid, then draws a portion of the viscous, glowing mixture into an oversize syringe, regarding the whole procedure with unconcealed distaste. Keys Hall wears an acrylic splatter guard that looks like nothing so much as a transparent welder’s mask. His

red gloves and yellow sleeves continue Tobe's practice of strategically peppering the film with fiery colors. They get the shot in two quick takes, as Tobe is anxious to move on to the next very complicated sequence.

As the crew prepares for the next setup, Steve Brooks oversees a second unit insert of the vial of bilious green fluid. And that's lunch at about 6:30 pm.

It's production assistant Sean Williams' 21st birthday! Congratulations all around.

One of the extras shows around a copy of *The National Enquirer* with a headline that boldly reads "GROOM COMBUSTS BRIDE! Spontaneous combustion?!"

The crew returns from lunch and set to work without preamble. They shoot the top of the sequence in Marsh's office with Brad at the desk, rifling through files of red and orange and green. Marsh's office walls are hung with motel art prints of adobe bunkers, perhaps a veiled reference to Alamogordo, New Mexico, the test site of the Trinity atomic explosion. The room is also painted a calming blue, a sharp contrast to the violent struggle about to take place.

In the scene, Cagney tries to force an injection on Sam, who understandably resists, giving in to his rage. They grapple with each other, and Sam overpowers Cagney, throwing him a to the desk and disarming him of the needle, which he then uses to subdue and interrogate him. When Cagney responds with scorn, Sam's fury is unleashed, with incendiary results.

Tobe invites Michael Keys Hall to "step into the storm."

Greg Gault reviews the fight choreography with the principal actors, showing Brad how to safely bounce Michael off the desktop, encouraging him to accentuate his lines with every thrust.

When Brad says, "I'm afraid I'll..." I think that he's going to express concern about potentially hurting Michael, but he continues by saying, "...forget my lines."

Todd regales us with this crude joke: Q: How do you tell the difference between an anal and an oral thermometer? A: The taste.

Ubiquitous cigar and Dr. Pepper in hand, Tobe decides that it would be cool if they were to knock the lamp from the desk in the struggle, sending their shadows dancing on the wall as it crashes to the floor.

In Tobe's and Howard Goldberg's screenplay, Cagney wears a full hazardous materials radiation suit. However, here he is armed only with the acrylic shield and a chainmail apron for protection. Instead, the hazmat suit hangs on the wall, which I take to be, on reflection, a subtle indication that Marsh has seriously underestimated Sam's power.

For some reason, David snaps at Eric, practically ordering him off the set. Eric is understandably upset, sulking in the corner, as he feels he hasn't done anything wrong

Levie holds the camera on his shoulder for the first shot, following the action and crouching low as Brad takes Michael down. Lead man Charlie Doane wrangles the lamp, pulling it from the frame as they wrestle atop the desk. Just before the blazing dénouement occurs, they cut.

Anticipating the fate of his character, Michael Keys Hall facetiously narrates the action: "Boom, boom, boom...and we explode into a billion points of light!"

Pyro guys Duncan and Guy take over to rig Michael's hand to smoke and Brad's shoulder to pop. I notice for the first time that 1st assistant Doug Adam is not here. Instead, we have a new crew member in his place, mop-haired Dana Gonzales.

Tony Hooper and production assistant Darrel Green visit a nearby soundstage to watch pop band *The Bangles* shoot a music video. They return wholly unimpressed.

Tobe rehearses Brad and Michael intensively, establishing the timing of the multiple effects and their reactions.

"After the effect, what do you do, that's what I want to know," says Tobe to Brad, who responds, suppressing a laugh, "That's a *really* good question, Boss!"

Tobe suggests that he try a smile when his shoulder shatters.

Before they roll, Brad crinkles his nose, squints his eyes, and purses his mouth into a ghastly frown, possibly a kind of physical sense memory that he uses to attune himself to the level of Sam's rising temper. I position myself in what I think is an ideal spot from which to shoot video, but Brad waves me out of his eyeline, so I'm forced relocate to another, less opportune vantage point.

While waiting for the shot to come off, Craig lounges nearby, puffing lazily on a cigarette.

It's time to roll. Second assistant cameraman Brian dons goggles and wraps himself in a furniture pad. Everybody is intensely focused. Tobe calls "Action!" Brad and Michael tussle. Michael's hand quivers and smokes. There is a blinding flash and a spray of sparks. Michael screams. Brad cries out in pain as his shoulder bursts and spews out a swirling plume of smoke.

The instant that Tobe calls "Cut!" Brad pipes up, "Somebody come get this out, man! It's *burnin'*!"

Michael tries to pat out Brad's smoldering arm, but Guy Faria quickly steps in and yanks out the hot squib. I catch the whole thing on video. The shot is spectacular, but Brad is not at all happy.

Upstairs in the makeup room, Bill applies a burn makeup to Michael's hand as Steve Neill and hair stylist Kerry Mendenhall look on. He uses a collodion base to create scarring, then smudges with red and black coloring. Kat stands impatiently over him, checking her watch frequently. Feeling some pressure, Bill gently asserts that "this is some serious makeup" in his appeal for just a little more time. In the end, he's more than satisfied with the results, telling Steve, "That looks pretty good. I mean, nobody's ever had this kind of a burn before!"

Today's call sheet indicates several exterior shots requiring numerous background extras scheduled for the end of the day. It becomes clear that the shots will have to be pushed to another day, and the extras, who have been waiting around since 4:00 pm, are sent home.

As Jon Cypher waits for his call in his impeccably tailored dark suit, Craig sneaks up behind him and tapes a sign to his back that reads, "C&R."

They make short work of the day's last shot, in which Marsh rushes into his office to discover Cagney's unconscious body, his scarred, blackened hand twitching in the foreground. Cypher is especially good, expressing no remorse for Cagney's fate, only disgust.

We wrap at 2:30 am, earlier than expected. There are sandwiches and wrap beer for the crew. Bonus! I'm invited to attend dailies in Stage 4 at 3:00 am.

Tobe's gone home for the evening, but Levie and David are there, along with Paul, Jerry, and Sanford. Steve Neill, Eric, and I sit at the back. It's a rowdy group. There is much laughter and a slew of deprecating remarks.

David pulls Eric aside and sincerely apologizes for flipping out on him earlier, which is very cool. It takes a big man to admit when he's wrong.

The first reel projected is from Monday's shoot: Lisa and Marsh in the hospital waiting room. The images are crisp and clear, like staring through a squeaky-clean window. Levie's work is superlative. Cynthia looks incredibly beautiful. Her eyes are crystalline. There are also subtleties to her performance that would have been impossible to see on the set. Watching each take in quick succession is eye-opening, and I begin to see the shape of the scene.

The next reel consists of rushes from the frenetic ER sequence. Amid the tumult of the scene, the camera glides smoothly. Brad contorts himself in exquisite pain. It's actually unnerving to watch, despite the fact that they are only a series of discrete shots.

Good times.

Thursday, March 9, 1989 - Day 9

Today we travel to 1955.

I arrive on the stage to find Tobe and Paul walking the halls surrounding the "office" that Eric and I had just reacquired yesterday. They're likely to use the hallways in today's shoot, so we may have to clear out again. On, the indignity!

There are a lot of new faces on the set. Melinda Dillon is here, in costume and primed for her first day. Though she is probably best known for her idiosyncratic work in both Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* and Bob Clark's satirical *A Christmas Story*, what's more noteworthy to me is that she was a member of the original Broadway cast of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, a seminal and controversial piece of American theater.

Retired Marine captain Dale Dye acted as military advisor on Tobe's remake of *Invaders from Mars*, and also played a small role in the film. He's been cast as the no-nonsense colonel responsible for the success of Project Samson, i.e., the testing of an experimental drug purporting to protect humans from the deadly effects of atomic radiation. With his keen military bearing and his distinguished grey hair and mustache, he commands immediate respect.

For eight years in the '60s and '70s, Dick Butkus was a linebacker for the Chicago Bears, but since injuries forced him into retirement, he has become well regarded as a broadcaster and occasional actor. In 1971, he

appeared as himself in *Brian's Song*, the moving filmed biography of Brian Piccolo, and subsequently played roles in quite a few other movies, including *The Longest Yard* with Burt Reynolds. He's here to play a U.S. Army general gung ho for the project.

On the call sheet, the first scene up is Peggy Bell in childbirth, but the decision has been made to reschedule it for this afternoon and instead attack the much more involved Scene 20, in which the newborn David Bell is examined by army doctors and observed by powerful, intrusive military authorities

Tobe's plan is to shoot the entire scene "in one," that is, in a long master shot that captures all the action without a cut. On the dolly, the camera will perform an assortment of small moves, rolling gently forward and back and panning slightly as necessary. I've been wondering whether Levie would be making any kind of visual adjustment to indicate the change in period, and I notice that this set has been lit with an unmistakable greenish tint. In the foreground of the shot, a doctor, nurse, and scientist, their faces obscured by surgical masks, hover over a plastic army-issue bassinette and monitor Baby David's vital signs. They are watched with intense interest by high-ranking military personnel from behind a broad observation window in the background.

In order to prevent reflections in the window, new 1st AC Dana cloaks himself in a black blanket, which to my mind makes him look like the old witch in Disney's *Snow White*.

Dye is word-perfect in every take and Butkus is surprisingly good as the effusive general. When Melinda enters the nursery, with her bright white smock and long blonde hair, she appears almost angelic.

For the first few takes, the baby is played by a rubber doll. But the stage is soon hushed as the wrangler brings the real live infant onto the set. (On the call sheet, he is referred to as "Baby Hinkley.") Tobe whispers his instructions to the crew as they prepare to roll. On cue, Melinda gathers the child into her arms and nuzzles it to her cheek, murmuring sweetly like a doting parent.

Off the set, Melinda continues to cuddle with the tot as she chats amiably with his mother. I learn that his name is Matthew.

Eric and I speculate together that the character of the nameless doctor, played by Sandy Ignon, is in fact the father of John Marsh. In his waiting room parlay with Lisa, Marsh says that he had taken over his father's

“research project,” so it seems a reasonable conclusion, even though it’s never explicitly stated in the script.

I’m told that Scott, the background extra playing the general’s aide, was originally set to appear in the present-day sequences scheduled for later today, but the hair stylist inadvertently trimmed his hair into a ’50s cut, so they placed him in this scene. Lucky break.

For the record, the Geiger counter used in the scene has been provided by my good friend Frank Guttler.

They set up for a slow move into a close-up on the baby. Bill Miller-Jones runs in and applies a tiny version of Sam’s birthmark to the infant’s hand, which figures prominently in the shot.

“Baby makeup,” says Eric.

Tobe explains to me that this image will serve as the transition from past to present, cross-fading to a complementary shot of Sam’s adult birthmark.

At Tobe’s request, Eric and I stroll over to Stage 4 to take some pictures of the painted backdrop of “Peggy and Brian’s Dream House.”

When we return, the baby is wrapped, and they are shooting coverage of the scene. In one take, Dale is so caught up that he keeps right on acting even after Tobe cuts.

At the end of the sequence, the colonel insensitively remarks on the providence of the child’s birth date being August 6th, which is the anniversary of the day that the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. In this light, it’s interesting to note that, with the exception of the first few minutes, the whole course of the film takes place in one single yet eventful day: Sam’s birthday.

Lunch at about 9:00 pm. For today’s call sheet, I’ve done a drawing of a little man with his head in flames, running away and saying, “Ow, ow, ow, ow...”

Leslie LaHoda, who is Cynthia’s lighting double, lays on a cold steel table in the delivery room set, acting as stand-in for Stacy Edwards.

In contrast to the hushed and restrained mood of the day’s previous shots, the atmosphere in the delivery room is brimming with high spirits.

The set is basically just the corner of a grey-tiled room with an IV and some medical apparatus set up around a makeshift delivery table. Tobe’s idea of shooting the entirety of the scene in one shot with no coverage is both clever and economical. As designed, it begins on the doctor, then tilts

down into a large close-up on Peggy, her face bathed in sweat and contorted by birth pangs, while the wriggling shadow of her newborn child falls on the tile walls behind her.

The baby doll is the source of much hilarity. When Tobe calls attention to its unnatural jiggle, Levie says, “Yeah, Steve said it looks like a rubber chicken!” When Tobe suggests a slash of shadow to hide the doll’s conspicuous scrotum, “Why don’t we just cut ’em off?” is Levie’s helpful solution.

Tobe confers with production medic Molly Malloy about the proper way to deliver a baby, by firmly holding the legs together and gently supporting the neck. She demonstrates as he watches avidly.

Looking at her, sweating and huffing in her Jackie O wig, it occurs to me how fitting it is that Stacy’s first shot in the film is of her character giving birth.

Steve Brooks, dressed appropriately enough in hospital scrubs for his appearance as an orderly in a later scene, manipulates the baby’s movement with a thin length of fishing line. Steve Brooks, famed baby puppeteer!

Before they roll on the first take, Paul holds the rubber baby in front of his face and says in a squeaky, high-pitched voice, “Okay, let’s have it quiet! We’re rolling!”

After the take, Tobe asks Levie, “Uh, we’re you watching the baby? I can’t...I really can’t see the baby’s performance!” and everybody laughs.

Since we have to be out of the Lindsey Stage tonight, we’re really under the gun. The crew assembles in one of the many hospital corridors on the stage. From the corner of my eye, I see Steve Neill walking away with a pair of dummies slung over his back, like some ghoulish grave robber.

While the crew sets up for the next scenes, co-producer Jerry Lambert takes Tobe over to Stage 4 to view the dailies that were screened last night.

The first order of business is the continuation of the emergency room sequence that went unfinished on Monday. This confrontation between Marsh and Sam had originally been intended to occur in the ER proper, but it’s been rethought to take place in an available hallway.

With Lisa fast by his side, Sam is wheeled down the hall, squirming and grunting in excruciating pain, when suddenly Marsh pops up, stopping them short as he coolly inspects Sam’s wound.

Brad arrives on the set, feeling refreshed after a nap in his dressing room.

Scott, the background player that appeared as the colonel's adjutant earlier today also shows up as an intern in this sequence, one of dozens that bustle through the hall. I speak with him briefly and he tells me that he runs a small production company for a living and is just doing this as a lark. Movie star handsome, he looks to me to be about 19 years old but admits that he's actually 30(!). Good genes, I guess.

I don't envy Carin and Julia, having to costume and corral all of these extras.

The first take goes extremely well, wonderfully acted by all three principals. Cynthia cries, "There was FIRE COMING *OUT OF HIS ARM!*" with terrifying conviction. As Cypher plays him, Marsh is utterly indifferent to Sam's suffering.

At the tail end of the next take, Tobe meanders through the frame before he calls for a cut, cracking everybody up.

Late into the night, things get a bit giddy. Second AC Brian secretly hangs a sign on Craig's back that reads "I slept with Levie to get this job."

Immediately after they get the shot, Tobe takes the second unit and hurriedly gets a series of reaction shots of selected extras from the ER scene, including Jerry Lambert and Leslie LaHoda. Meanwhile, David Hayball and his team light several connecting hallways for Cynthia's upcoming mad dash. As he rigs a light to the ceiling, Tobe walks the hallway, prompting David to warn him "Watch your head, Tobe! Wouldn't want to lose the director!"

Best boy electrician Johnny Cheshire comes into my sanctuary to hang a few Klieg lights, muttering, "There's a fake roof in here. We're fucked!"

Poor Adriano. He's been waiting around in full costume for the last three hours, waiting to double for Brad, but it's just been determined that his services won't be needed.

It's nearly 2:00 am. At Todd's insistence, we break for second meal before rolling on the next setup.

Cynthia twirls down the hallway and Tobe applauds her as the crew readies for the next series of shots, in which Lisa hustles through the hospital in search of Nina, stalked by Sam's disembodied atomic consciousness. Despite the late hour, things are humming along. The camera sits high on the dolly, and when Tobe calls "Action!" it chases her

with surprising speed. With the shots in the can, Tobe is hungry to tackle the next, much more complicated scene.

In rehearsal, there's a frustrating bit of business with the actor cast as the security guard. He seems constitutionally incapable of getting his timing right, always entering much too late, in addition to delivering his one line in a laconic drawl. Cypher cannot hide his displeasure, but Tobe just grins.^[14]

Marsh blocks Lisa's flight through the hospital halls and implores her to submit to his authority. He insists that Sam is destroyed, telling her, "You've been triggered, too!" Gesturing flamboyantly to a tray of Sam's personal effects among a heap of ashes, he declares, "*This* is what's left of your boyfriend! Do you want to be *next*?!"

After a few false starts, mostly because of the difficulty of coordinating Cynthia's headlong sprint with the gurney that blocks her path, the highly charged scene proceeds smoothly. Cypher is especially good, verging on madness, and calling into question the perception of his character as a villain. As he watches the performance, it is abundantly clear that Tobe is thoroughly enjoying himself.

Wrap at roughly 3:30 am after quite a full day. As he is leaving the stage for the night, I get a good look at UPM Sanford Hampton's crew jacket. On the back is embroidered: "*I Was a Teenage Vampire.*"

Friday, March 10, 1989 - Day 10

We begin today at 4:30 pm in the parking lot at the back of Stage 4 to shoot the end of a scene that we began at John Marshall High a million years ago, in which young Judith drops off an ambiguous package in Sam's Studebaker.

Brad has reverted to his "GQ" look. Judith is again in her summery outfit. The camera, fitted with a wide lens, is placed on the passenger seat, facing the driver's side window. The infamous blue Chrysler is parked alongside, in the remote chance that it might be seen in the shot.

It's another one-shot deal. Judith is seen warily scoping out the car through the window and leaning in with the battered red hatbox. Sam's sudden appearance and exclamation of "Boo!" startles her and she scampers off, with Sam calling after her, "Jennifer, are you *spying* on me?" Puzzled, he gets into the car and opens the gift box, which contains a tarnished

antique watch. Sam regards it curiously. Almost absentmindedly, he winds the mysterious watch and jangles the bauble hanging from its gold chain.

Several of the extras scheduled to work later today gather around to watch, but there's not much to see, as all of the action is confined to the car's interior. Two smooth takes later, just as the late afternoon sky begins to dim, they're ready to move on.

The stage's lobby entrance is redressed as the emergency room receiving dock, with lighted signs and decorative shrubbery and an ambulance parked out front. The grip crew lay dolly tracks down the long sloping driveway.

Since they're not nearly ready to shoot, I venture into the stage to investigate the goings-on there. Inside, the art department is busily prepping a number of small, freestanding sets scheduled to work today: the "attractive" bomb shelter, Brian and Peggy's cozy living room, and the "Atomic City" backdrop. I meet set decorator Ann Job and compliment her on the authenticity and level of detail in the décor and properties. Also under construction are the blast bunker, Lisa's apartment, and Olander's foyer, all at varying stages of completion.

Outside, darkness has fallen. The camera dolly is set on the tracks and Tobe rides as they rehearse the camera move. During one run-through, the dolly derails and the grips have to scramble to keep it from falling off the tracks. While they reset, Craig recalls for Tobe an incident involving their mutual acquaintance, director of photography Bob Caramico (who was Tobe's cinematographer on *Eaten Alive*). As the story goes, Bob and his crew were filming on a rugged hillside where tracks had been laid in a similar way. A large man, Caramico was riding the dolly when it suddenly broke loose from its moorings and plummeted down the hill. As he disappeared into the gulley, he could be heard yelling out to his key grip, "You're fiiiiiiiiired!"

Out of her wardrobe, Judith comes around to sweetly say goodbye to everyone until her return on Monday.

Brian Bremer comes up to me and says, "Hi!" He looks terrific decked out in his '50s-era outfit, complete with sharply pleated slacks, sweater vest, and penny loafers. This is his first day in front of the camera and he's clearly excited. He's currently a student at Pepperdine University in Malibu, where he recently appeared as Mozart in a stage production of Anthony Schaffer's *Amadeus*. In addition to his role in *Pumpkinhead*, he's also been

featured in Brian Yuzna's directorial debut, the twisted and gooey *Society*. He seems to me a genuinely friendly and charming young man.

In the upcoming sequence, Lisa drives Brad to the hospital in the Studebaker, screeching to a halt at the entrance to the ER. The shot involves a resourceful piece of misdirection. Due to the high speed and proximity of the car to the crew, the vehicle is initially driven by Cynthia's stunt double, Glory Fioramonti. When the car comes to a skidding stop, Glory, wearing a blonde wig and Lisa's duplicate wardrobe, leaps out and runs from the frame. Cynthia then enters from the other side to help Brad out of the car, giving the impression that she was in fact behind the wheel. It takes a few tries to get the timing right, but when it works, it's seamless.

As Glory pulls the car away to get into position for the first rehearsal, Brad mugs to his wife, Joni, and his two daughters, Kristina and Fiona, who have come to visit the set. Guy Faria rides in the back seat to provide the smoke effect fuming from Sam's festering arm. But he seems to overdo it a bit, because when the car pulls to a stop, the air inside is as thick as a 1920s speakeasy, cracking everybody up.

The Studebaker must have gotten a tune-up. In Malibu, it could barely climb the slight incline up to Olander's gate, but now it runs like a dream.

They shoot many takes of the car's approach, with Todd and his best boy Richard Crompton managing considerable speed as they drag the dolly up the slope with Levie and Dana astride it. On the best take, Brad emerges from the car enveloped in a perfect, swirling cloud of smoky mist.

We break for lunch just before 11:00 pm. In the upstairs production office, I see hanging on the wall a striking poster of a blossoming mushroom cloud.

Back at the front of the building, the dolly tracks are adjusted slightly for the next shot, in which Lisa flees from the hospital, runs to her car, and roars off. The camera move is essentially the reverse of the last setup. Robinson stands in the lobby with Cynthia, and on Paul's cue via walkie-talkie, prompts her flight out the door. After six takes, which all look virtually identical to me, it's time to move inside.

We regroup at the "attractive" bomb shelter, which is basically an idealized representation of the more-practical oppressive lead canister in which Brian and Peggy will reside to endure the atomic blast. To be photographed in black and white, this scene will be used as part of a

jingoistic newsreel produced by the military for consumption by a gullible public.

The shelter is cheerily appointed with flowered drapes, family portraits, and all the comforts of home, including a copy of the 1955 edition of the World Atlas. The shelves are liberally stocked with canned goods and provisions, with a few incongruous additions, such as a gas mask and numerous boxes bearing civil defense insignia.

They roll without recording sound, so Craig gets to sit on his hands. Tobe talks Brian and Stacy through the scene, and they jauntily go about the business of settling into their new abode. They improvise their lovey-dovey dialogue, often punctuated with “sweetie” and “honey” and “dear.” In her stylish housedress, Stacy is the picture of the happy homemaker with Brian as her devoted husband. With a flourish worthy of *Let's Make A Deal's* Carol Merrill, she proudly displays the room to the newsreel camera. Meanwhile, Brian puffs a pipe and responsibly pays the household bills.

They are a delight to watch. Everyone is having a great time, and since they're not recording sound, there are a lot of laughs.

The shelter is now filled to capacity as Dale Dye and Dick Butkus reassume their roles, joined by a brace of faceless dignitaries, assorted aides de camp, scientist Bill Forward, and Frank Whiteman as the younger Olander. They all squeeze together in a semicircle behind Brian and Stacy in a cynically stage-managed photo op. Dye's colonel congratulates the couple on their brave participation in their historic endeavor. There are clumsy handshakes all around as Brian is presented with the keys to a brand-new Studebaker and a picture of their new suburban tract house. (They were just about to strike the set when Tobe remembered Eric's photo and insisted that it be used in the sequence.)

Brian and Stacy run to wardrobe for a quick costume change as the crew repositions the camera in front of the “dream house” scrim, mere yards away. The Studebaker is parked in front of the backdrop, waxed and polished as if fresh off the assembly line. A large yellow sign reading “Atomic City” stands at the periphery of the scenic view.

When they return to the set, Stacy is in her Sunday best and Brian wears the natty suit that he was wearing when he and I first met, topped off with a jaunty fedora. As before, Tobe simply tells them what to do as the camera rolls. Just before they shoot, production designer Gene Abel runs around the

stage, filling the air with diffusion spray. The general's aide welcomes the wholesome couple to their new neighborhood as they all wave vacuously to the American people. The shot comes off with unprecedented efficiency.

I go outside for some air. The night is cool and comfortable. I wander to the front of the stage, which only a few short hours ago was a bustling hub of activity but which is now abandoned, dark and desolate. Resisting the urge to read something profound into my observation, I head back inside.

There's a party in Brian and Peggy's apartment. It's his birthday and she is noticeably pregnant. A home movie camera captures brief flashes of the celebration. Brian blows out candles on a cake. Peggy has difficulty getting up from her chair. They play with the baby's toys in merry anticipation of his imminent arrival.

In this seemingly impromptu sequence, Tobe is inventive. He has Brian operate the 8mm camera, looking at Levie in the mirror as Levie looks back with his own Panavision camera, achieving the convincing illusion that Brian is in fact filming his own reflection. Coupled with the blinding bright lights mounted on the home movie camera, it is a strikingly surreal image.

[\[15\]](#)

Paul calls it a wrap at 1:30 am, and a huge cheer echoes through the stage. Tobe beams as he congratulates everyone on a job well done. He singles out Levie and David for special thanks. Everyone is buzzing happily, looking forward to the weekend and a well-deserved rest. The wrap beer flows.

With its brisk pace and high spirits, this day has been the most fun so far. I'm exhausted, but I don't think I'll sleep much tonight.

Saturday, March 11, 1989

It's a full house in the screening area at Stage 4. Tobe, the producers, the film editor, all the department heads, and much of the crew are here this afternoon to view dailies of the past week's efforts.

We see footage from the hospital waiting room, the hectic ER scene, Marsh's examination room, and Cagney's unfortunate (for him, at least) confrontation with Sam.

As expected, the images are sharp and clear and expertly composed, the camera moves fluid and precise. Also, it's fascinating to watch Brad modulate his performance from scene to scene and shot to shot. However,

the unchallenged highlight of the presentation is the brazen, unflinching close-up of Brad's yawning, oozing arm wound, which is met with gasps and groans and hoots, with some in attendance doubling over with laughter. Robinson's comment pretty much sums it up: "That was *bitchin'*!"

Before we know it, the reels are ended. It's astonishing how fast a week's worth of work can fly by.

WEEK THREE

FLASHBACK

Monday, March 13, 1989 - Day 11

Back to the '50s.

Scene 23: in an underground cinderblock room, the grisly remains of Brian and Peggy Bell are encircled by the members of Project Samson. The colonel fumes at the incompetence of the team while Nina is dismayed.

The doctor admits his fascination with this unexpected result and the scientist is impressed, calling it “the cleanest kill I’ve ever seen.”

When I arrive on the set at 9:00 am, pyrotechnician Guy Faria, using an acetylene mini torch, is burnishing Steve Neill’s strangely beautiful sculptures of the burnt, bloated corpses. The bodies are locked in a dying embrace, their blistered faces frozen in hideous contortions of agonizing pain.

At Tobe’s direction, Guy singes the edges of the burn victim’s still-intact clothing. (One of the properties of Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC) is that while human flesh burns, most other materials remain unaffected.) With his trim beard and jet-black pompadour, Faria bears more than a passing resemblance to Wolfman Jack.

Steve Neill steps in with a large plastic bag, from which he artfully peppers ash on and around the bodies. In a nod to the themes of the film, and also in keeping with his interest in aeronautics, Steve wears a T-shirt bearing the image of a vintage WWII aircraft called the “Spitfire.” By the same token, Guy’s shirt is emblazoned with a picture of a phoenix, the mythical flaming bird that rises again from the remnants of its own ashes.

For the first shot of this lengthy, dialogue-heavy scene, the camera sits high on the dolly, begins slowly rolling from a far corner of the set, and

inches forward. The cluster of actors obscures any clear view of the luckless Bell's charred husks, which are to be revealed later in a "shock cut."

Dale Dye plays the colonel as totally unmoved by the tragic loss of life. He is only concerned with the weapons application of the experiment, commanding, "Let's get *hot* and get some answers!" I've come to recognize that the script is filled with dozens of these off-hand references to heat and fire.

On a scorched cabinet beside the bed rests a crumbling toy carousel, melted like an ice-cream cake left in the sun. Offset by the drab grey walls, Tobe continues his repeating motif of placing reds and yellows and oranges subconsciously in the frame, most notably in the crimson ribbons that flutter from an air vent like tongues of flame.

At the height of the scene's tension, Dick Butkus, reprising his role as the general, enters with Dr. Vandermeer, a character patterned at least in part after Dutch expatriate physicist Niels Bohr, one of the architects of the Manhattan Project. In a bit of a coup, Tobe has cast in the role legendary filmmaker Andre de Toth, director of the classic noir thriller *Crime Wave* as well as the 3-D sensation *House of Wax*, starring Vincent Price. De Toth wears an eye patch, and the apparent contradiction of a one-eyed man directing a movie in 3-D has been much discussed.

Being his area of expertise, Vandermeer explains the phenomenon of Spontaneous Human Combustion in a long and sometimes convoluted speech. With his bullish bald head and thick Bavarian accent, de Toth is a perfect fit for the role. Although de Toth appears intellectually quite sharp for a man of his age, Tobe has Robinson write some of his more difficult lines onto cue cards to be used if necessary.

Steve Neill brings Brian's shrunken skull around for Tobe's approval. Told that it should be a bit bigger, he hurriedly remodels it with gel and gives it to the show's caterer to bake in the oven.

I'm asked if I'd like to run the projector for tomorrow's celebration scene. Of course, I agree and projectionist Mark shows me how to work the damn thing.

Remembering that Eric owns a 3-D still camera (a camera with four lenses that produces lenticular photographs, creating the illusion of three-dimensional images), I tell him that he *must* use it to get a photo of Tobe and de Toth together.

Makeup man Bill Miller-Jones tells me that in 1953 he was actually an extra in de Toth's *House of Wax*(!). He describes the bulky 3-D camera that was used ("Two huge Mitchell's, monstrous!") and goes on about the disorienting sight of Victorian costumes and horse-drawn carriages in modern-day Burbank. Somewhat incongruously, he also shares with me this recipe for screen snot: Karo syrup, yellow food coloring, a touch of glycerin, and a dash of Lubriderm. Almost as an afterthought, Bill shares with me the news that he's just become a grandfather.

At lunch, Steve Brooks makes another characteristically rude remark, comparing de Toth's physiognomy to the Oakland Raiders' pirate emblem.

Tobe reviews the script with Andre as the crew reset for his close-up. In his speech, Vandermeer uses the phrase, "fire from Heaven," a term coined by religious fanatics to describe a series of inexplicable deaths by fire.^[16] *Fire from Heaven* is also the title of a book by journalist Michael Harrison which details the history, myths, and reported incidents of the SHC experience, and which Tobe and Howard used as an invaluable reference tool in constructing their screenplay.

They shoot many, many long takes of Vandermeer's soliloquy, with de Toth speaking forcefully, though sometimes haltingly, and often backtracking or repeating his lines. Near the end of one particularly excellent take, he reaches into his breast pocket for the pencil he will use to probe the bodies but comes up empty. Looking directly at Tobe, he says accusingly, "You stole my pencil!" and laughs.

Levie's camera performs a lovely countermove when Vandermeer ambles to the head of the bed, brandishing the pencil and intoning, "Yes, the fire from Heaven was certainly here today."

The actors are released on a break while Steve Neill touches up the Brian's swollen black head, preparing to shoot Vandermeer's intrusive skull excavation. He stuffs the head with a spongy grey mass of foam, ash, and latex, muttering, "This is a messy job."

Outside, the wind is howling.

Levie shoots the shocking reveal of the horrific results of SHC, tilting up from entwined ashen hands to bulbous black heads.

All ready to go. Tobe calls, "Action!" and Andre jabs the pencil into the side of the head and ferrets around. "Dig deeper. Deeper," Tobe instructs.

Andre digs and digs until finally he retracts the skull, blows dust from the scalp and holds it up with a gleeful flourish, as if he's just pulled a

rabbit out of a hat.

I lean over and whisper to Steve Brooks, “That’s an impressive bit of skullduggery.” When he looks at me sideways, I shrug as if to say, “I couldn’t help myself.”

Second meal at about 7:00 pm. Pizza again, but I’m not complaining.

The prop guys reset the bed, turning it around so they can shoot Melinda’s single against the back wall. (The set being only three sided, they have to fake it.) She’s very pensive as they prepare to roll. To my ear, Melinda’s accent seems more pronounced when Nina is upset, or possibly I’m just imagining it.

Paul gets a little agitated. When the horseplay between shots gets a little out of hand, he loses it, shouting, “Just *stop fucking around!*” which dampens the mood on the set considerably.

They shot more than twenty-five separate camera angles on this one scene, which must be a record.

After they’ve got the whole scene in the can, Tobe calls Andre to the set to make a “wild” recording of his big speech.

Craig rolls sound and calls out, “Speed!”

Andre performs the tricky monologue in one excellent effort, and the crew applauds.

Rather than leave once the scene is wrapped, the art department and lighting crew set about redressing the cinderblock room for tomorrow’s first shot. Thinking ahead.

After we wrap at 8:30, dailies are screened upstairs. The black and white newsreel footage of Brian and Peggy is priceless. It reminds me of a 1950s sitcom, but David Hayball has a different view: “It looks like the hygiene films they used to make us watch in grade school!”

Tuesday, March 14, 1989 - Day 12

Today’s call sheet declares that it’s loud shirt day!

The cement room, as it’s being called, is transformed for a celebration. Tables have been placed, elegantly candlelit and set with fine silver, champagne, and pastries over rich green cloth. A movie screen is unfurled at the far end of the room. Many extras dressed in fancy period wardrobe mingle on the set. Brian and Stacy, in contrast, wear pajamas and plain blue terrycloth robes.

Tobe, apparently in recognition of this special day, wears a blindingly bright red shirt. He's got a lot of balls in the air today, having to literally choreograph the extras in juxtaposition with the camera movement and also complete two sections of important dialogue, all while maintaining the jubilant party mood.

In this sequence, Brian and Peggy Bell have survived the bomb blast and reportedly show no signs of radiation toxicity or aftereffects from their medication. It's a happy day for Modern Atomic Technologies, the secretive conglomerate financing the project in collaboration with the military. The propaganda film is screened, and Brian receives a job offer from shadowy CEO Lewis Olander.

Incidentally, I'm told that since they're not actually projecting any film in the scene, my services in that regard will not be necessary.

Yesterday it was discovered, after they had already shot Frank Whiteman as the younger Olander, that his eyes are a deep brown, almost black, while William Prince, who has evidently been cast as the older Olander, has distinctive pale blue eyes. Will Prince be required to wear contact lenses? Or will it matter at all, I wonder, given the older character's infirmity (since often one's eye color fades with old age)?

The first shot is a wide master of the whole room, which appears larger than the claustrophobic bunker it was yesterday, even though it's now packed with people. The camera rolls and the partygoers mill around, sipping drinks and sampling hors d'oeuvres. I notice production coordinator Rochelle Goodrich and wardrobe assistant Janet Sobel among the party guests, as well as PA Robinson Miller, looking jaunty in a shiny seersucker sport coat.

Paul establishes the eyeline for the actors applauding as the newsreel ends, using a silver champagne bucket as a marker. "This is our happy couple right here, *not* the real couple...*this* is Brian and Peggy right here."

They move on to a tighter shot on Brian and Stacy sitting in the middle of the room, the literal center of attention, with Melinda seated just behind them. In their exchange, Nina can barely contain her joy at the young couple's affirmed well-being and future prospects for happiness. It's ironic that this happy moment takes place in the very room in which their roasted corpses will ultimately come to rest.

Before they roll on one take, Levie asks, "Did I hear 'speed'?"

Apparently, Craig has spoken up before Paul has called for the camera to roll, a breach of on-set propriety.

Todd interjects, “Aw, Craig screwed up again!”

Tobe calls for a cut and Paul upbraids Craig, “When *I* say ‘rolling,’ *you* say ‘speed,’ okay?”

“Yes sir,” comes Craig’s sheepish reply.

“Don’t let it happen again,” says Paul with finality.

Kerry Mendenhall, today wearing a flamboyant blue and green jungle print blouse, has done up Melinda’s hair in a lovely German braid.

David Hayball has failed to observe “loud shirt day,” and only wears his usual bland beige shirt and olive-green vest.

Brian tells me how much he enjoys working with Melinda and feels that they’ve formed an immediate bond.

In his guise as the colonel, Dale Dye occasionally stumbles over his lines, but always manages to make light of it. “That is outstanding...uh, just outstanding! I...I have a line here...and I’ve got it...right here in my *ass*! I’m gonna pull it out any second...!” It never fails to break up the crew.

In rehearsal, after raising a toast, he takes his first sip of champagne, makes a sour face, and says, “This tastes like *shit*!”

There’s good news on the set! Key grip Todd Griffith just received a phone call informing him that he’s going to be a daddy! Pats on the back and congratulations all around. Regrettably, the cheerful mood is tempered somewhat by Todd’s remembrance of the very recent death of a close friend (also a grip, apparently killed in a car accident on the way home from a shoot only days earlier).

Todd understandably gets a bit morose. “He could have been here right now, smokin’ cigarettes and...” He dissolves into tears, simultaneously happy and sad.

Across the stage, Richard McGuire and his crew are assembling a “fifteen-minute set” essentially from scratch, constructing a conference room out of three wood paneled walls.

Dick Butkus has arrived on the set for his part in the scene. I introduce myself to him, saying that I’m a big fan, even though I know next to nothing about football. His hands are enormous! When we shake, my hand disappears into his like a baseball into a pitcher’s mitt. He’s a genial man, but I can’t suppress the knowledge that he could snap me in two with the slightest provocation.

Levie operates a wonderful shot that begins close on a wall-mounted stereo speaker and pulls back through dancing couples crossing the frame, finally settling on Brian and Peggy swaying together to the music of The Platters singing “Only You.”

During one take, the camera follows Dale’s colonel as he takes Brian and Peggy aside to meet Olander.

Probably due to a change in their name from the original script, Dale stumbles over his introduction. “Mr. and Mrs. Hill, uh, Bell, Jones, Smith...” then, looking blankly at them, “...*you* maggots.”

Olander is backlit, a silhouette with only a pale slash of reddish light playing across his obscured face. Whiteman’s voice is low and warm, but also vaguely menacing.

At Tony Hooper’s makeshift workshop in another part of the stage, Sean and Robinson assist him in demonstrating the mechanical man he’s designed to drop to its knees and fall to its face while engulfed in flames.

Robinson is mightily impressed with Tony’s handiwork, gushing, “I want you all to know that this man is a mechanical expert! He’s a genius, that’s all he is, a *genius*!”

In truth, it *is* pretty impressive. Using only two-by-fours and Styrofoam, he’s built a life-size human armature with arms and legs and topped with one of Steve Neill’s foam latex heads. Operated from the back by a simple lever device, it produces a convincing collapse and a satisfying “thunk.”

During the lunch break, Tobe and Jerry Lambert meet with Steve Brooks and Guy Faria behind the stage to observe a fire test. Sitting on a wooden crate, a test dummy covered in flash paper suddenly bursts into flame. Propane jets spout raging balls of fire at a startling velocity, whipped up by the night’s gusty winds.

“It’s like the clothing is the paper on a firecracker and the body is the gunpowder!” Tobe says, obviously pleased.

Jerry thinks that it looks like the infamous images of a Hindu fakir’s self-immolation, and I have to agree that it does.

Inside the stage, the “fifteen-minute conference room” is lit, fully dressed, and ready for action. In this brief but pivotal scene, the now-familiar faces of Project Samson sit around a long oak table in fine leather chairs, the colonel at one end and Olander at the other. Having discovered Peggy’s pregnancy, they discuss options. They cannot know with any

certainty what the effects of radiation exposure and the medications might have on the child, if any. The scientist suggests termination, but the thought of abortion makes the colonel uneasy. Nina is strangely silent. The final decision falls to Olander. The scene is compact, so every word carries a lot of weight.

Late afternoon sun streams through venetian blinds, a touch of film noir. Dick Butkus smokes a pipe, and several of the others puff cigars throughout, giving the room the nostalgic air of an exclusive gentleman's club. To assist with the smoky ambience, a bunch of the crew also light up coronas, some using them to try out their best Tobe Hooper impressions. Eric, in a ghastly kiwi-green button-down shirt, lays on the floor, sucking on a stogie and adding to the room's grey fog.

Shooting the scene consists of only four comparatively simple setups. A master shot favoring Dale, a two-shot of Dick Butkus and Bill Forward's scientist, another of Sandy Ignon's doctor and Melinda, and lastly a slow push toward Whiteman as Olander.

Dale is great in the scene, expressing his distaste for the whole mess through gritted teeth. Also, Forward is wonderfully funereal in his emotionless proposal to "resolve the dilemma."

We wrap around 7:00 pm. Afterwards, Tobe does a curious thing. He asks Eric upstairs to videotape Frank Whiteman read for the role of the old, enfeebled Olander. I had thought that William Prince was a cinch for the part, but it's apparently still up in the air. Could it have something to do with the color of his eyes?

At any rate, Whiteman gives a credible reading, but Tobe reserves any judgment until he gets a chance to review the tape.

Reviewing my journal at the end of the day, I read this cryptic note, "Todd says, 'Cameron's probably an anteater!'" and have no idea what to make of it.

Wednesday, March 15, 1989 - Day 13

John Landis has come to Stage 4 to do his cameo appearance as the incinerated radio technician. I first see him on his way to makeup. Sean was assigned to pick him up, and he tells me that they had a great time together on the drive in. Landis is no stranger to being on camera. He starred (clad in

a gorilla suit) in the title role of his own first film, a low-budget monster movie parody called *Schlock*.

Miraculously, a radio station has sprouted on the spot previously occupied by the cinderblock room, and before that by the propagandized bomb shelter. Though it consists of little more than three parallel walls and a smattering of electronics, it's a thoroughly believable environment. There's a baby grand piano in one corner of the studio, a record library in the sound booth, and a sophisticated-looking mixing board. Someone could feel right at home broadcasting from here.

At 9:30 am, about an hour later than expected, they roll on the day's first shot: a close-up on Joe Mays as Myron Gold, aka "Dr. Persons," popular radio psychic. Mays has one of those recognizable faces that often show up in numerous supporting roles on a variety of sitcoms, television dramas, and feature films. As his radio persona, his voice is soothing and mellifluous, with a hint of insincerity. He performs his end of a phone conversation in which an anguished caller reveals the death of Amy Whittaker, Sam's acquaintance and chairman of the board of the nuclear power facility, the same conversation that Sam hears broadcast over his car radio on his way home from school.

Being the anal-retentive fellow that he is, Craig adjusts the dials on the radio station mixing board to their proper levels, even though there's almost no chance that they will even be seen in the shot.

Tobe meets with Landis in his office upstairs to go over the scene. In Landis' film *Coming to America*, Tobe made a brief appearance, so he is repaying the favor here by setting John on fire. He's flown in from Florida, leaving the set of his current film, *Oscar*, with Sylvester Stallone, just to be with us for the day.

Eric returns from a quick trip to Hollywood to pick up film slides from the last two days' shooting. Levie especially likes the photographs of the Vandemeer scene and the somehow-touching images of Brian and Peggy's final remains. Levie pays Eric a serious compliment, telling gaffer David Hayball that the photos look just as he wants the film to look. He adds that he was a little disappointed in the dailies from the scene—something about how the film was processed or color-corrected.

We break for an early lunch around noon. I spend it catching up with my journal while sitting in the exact spot on the set in which Landis is slated to be ignited. On the soundboard before me rests one lonely Twinkie.

After lunch, we get our first sight of Landis on film. It comes at the end of one of Levie's beautifully accomplished shots. Beginning on a large profile of Mays, haloed by the glow of a red light bulb, the camera then floats past him toward the booth, where Landis appears through the window, fiddling with wires and munching on a Twinkie.

Incredibly friendly and gregarious, Landis talks almost nonstop. He regales the crew with his many misadventures in filmmaking, but perhaps wisely avoids any mention of the tragic death of Vic Morrow during production on his segment of *The Twilight Zone*. Although the subject is much on my mind, I suppress any urge to ask him about it.

They move the camera into the engineer's booth to shoot Landis' single. In the scene, the radio tech takes Sam's desperate phone call from the hospital, rudely puts him off, and suffers the consequences. Watching Tobe and John interact, though they're clearly good friends, I get the impression that it's difficult to direct a director.

John is attentive to every detail, from the set to the props to the camera placement, in the way that I imagine him to be on one of his own sets. "Tobe, this "on air" sign was on during the first take and hasn't been on since! Should it be?" is a good example.

As shooting proceeds, Richard McGuire and his team erect the blast bunker on the stage, an exterior to be shot indoors. The bunker looks war-torn and weathered from previous bomb tests. A truck is backed onto the stage, and they shovel sand onto a tarp surrounding the compact fortress.

Landis snickers while telling me about how he dubbed a "goofy voice" over Tobe in *Coming to America*.

Paul, Steve Brooks, and stunt coordinator Greg Gault huddle together discussing the effects for the upcoming burn later this afternoon.

Landis tells us that when directing soul singer Aretha Franklin in *The Blues Brothers*, since she was unable to memorize lines, he would simply speak each line to her and have her repeat it back. He uses the same method here, having Nancy read out a line, after which he would say it, and so on.

Landis is funny in the scene. Juggling a handful of wires and a mouthful of Twinkie, his character is swiftly exasperated by the phone call, getting more and more combative until he is startled by a sudden flash. John is comfortable in front of the camera, but is hesitant about being videotaped, citing a bad experience while making *Thriller*, Michael

Jackson's dancing undead music video. So, I situate myself on a ladder overlooking the set and shoot stealthily from above.

Stuffing in Twinkie filling and wiping the corners of his mouth, Landis signals that he's ready to roll.

Tobe calls "Action!" and John shudders as if electrocuted, gagging and spitting out a gob of Twinkie and dollops of cream filling.

"Another senseless, Twinkie-related death!" declares David.

He looks incredibly silly, and I understand at once Landis' reluctance to be taped. Still, I'm secretly delighted to have caught the whole thing.

Another take finds Landis with his eyes bugging out, his mouth gaping wide, and trembling as if vomiting fire. Steve Brooks tells me that a visual effect will be superimposed to make it appear as if he's spewing flames like a fire-breathing dragon(!). John shares a story with the crew about a youthful visit to Magic Mountain in which a friend of his puked on an attraction called The Hellhole, spattering the stricken faces of the other unsuspecting thrill seekers.

There are "No Smoking" signs posted all over the set, which is something new. No doubt because of the live fire gags coming up. Also, I hear some grumblings from certain members of the crew about having to stay late so often.

Electricians Molly and Anne Marie demonstrate for me a curious device. It resembles a baby's rattle or possibly a party noisemaker. It holds a number of tiny reservoirs containing liquid mercury which, when swished back and forth, randomly connect or cut off an electrical circuit, the result being a shimmering reactive light effect. Anne Marie plays the thing like a maraca as Molly gyrates beside her in the flickering light, prompting Julia to tag them "Juicer girls!" or "Sparky babes!"

Evidently Tobe has taken ill and left for home, so Landis takes the helm for his last shot of the day. Guy rigs a false knee with a tiny explosive charge. The camera is placed on the floor. John looks through the viewfinder to check the shot before he takes his position. He instructs the crew as if he were the director, but always with good humor and a wry grin. When Landis takes his place on the floor, Paul calls for the camera to roll. John struggles briefly to get to his feet. Suddenly, his kneecap explodes with a bright flash and a sharp crack. Paul yells, "Cut!," and without missing a beat Landis quizzically asks, "Did the flashbulbs go off?"

Next up is Greg's body burn, a very dangerous stunt. But I'm assured that Greg is the complete professional and has taken every precaution. Todd and his grips have erected a tall platform to place the camera above the action. Another camera shoots through the window into the booth. Levie and the camera crew make their last-minute preparations as Greg, black-haired, bearded, and dressed in Landis' beige windbreaker, is doused with flammable liquid and covered in protective gel.

The stage is hushed. Only when Greg indicates that he's ready will they roll. At Greg's go-ahead, Guy lights him up and steps away. Fully engulfed in flames, he crashes into the window, feels his way along the wall, twirls around and smashes into the other wall, falls back into the mixing board, then collapses to the floor in a fiery heap.

"Cut!" shouts Landis as Greg lays smoldering.

Guy rushes in and extinguishes him.

Everything is silent as Paul quietly asks, "You all right, Greg?"

"Yep," comes the answer, and the stage erupts into applause.

A small fire has broken out on the wall of the set. Someone yells, "Fire on the set!" but Levie calls down, "Let it burn! It looks good on this camera!"

For the day's final and most eagerly anticipated shot, Tony Hooper, responsible for the bulk of practical effects on the show, has attached a crude replica of a human torso to a kind of catapult, which will hurl the radio tech's burning body slamming into the window. The dummy, in Landis' windbreaker and blue work shirt, holds a fascination for the crew. Todd comments on the realism of the molded foam head, which has painted-on hair and a painted-on beard.

Guy lights the dummy up. With two cameras rolling on the shot, Paul calls "Action!" The blazing torso smashes into the window. Then again. The laughs start early and increase quickly. Again. Whap! It leaves its sticky imprint on the window. And again. Splat! The dummy's face is reduced to oatmeal. By the time Paul calls, "Cut!" the entire crew is overcome with hilarity.

Todd calls out, "Let's hear it for Guy!" but to my mind it's Tony who deserves all the credit.

We wrap at nearly midnight. Apparently, John Landis slipped quietly away while no one was looking.

Thursday, March 16, 1989 - Day 14

Today the bomb goes off.

Eric had to have a mechanic fix the breaks on his car, so he and I arrive quite late to the set, about 3:00 pm. But without the repair, we're told we might never have made it at all, as the pads were worn paper-thin. No matter. They're still at least an hour away from shooting.

Now fully dressed, the blast bunker is an impressive piece of work. The exterior is a small desert wasteland with rolling sand dunes and tumbleweed surrounded by a sky-blue cyclorama. The interior is totally convincing, with its schematic area maps, communications console, blackboard with intractable diagrams of longitudinal calculations, and musty atmosphere.

This is the event that starts the whole ball rolling. Nina, the colonel, the general, and their subordinates hunker down within the twelve-inch-thick protective walls of the fortified shelter to witness the bomb's detonation. At the end of the tense countdown, nothing happens. A misfire is suspected, until the bunker is abruptly suffused in brilliant white light and the shockwave hits.

Dale Dye, in his tidy uniform, flight jacket and Garrison cap, chomping on a cigar, reminds me a bit of General Jack Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*. Tobe blocks the scene with him while Paul motivates the colonel's aide: "Now Scott, you're the West Point graduate with a 250 IQ..."

The small bunker is crammed with a large camera rig and about a dozen people, all dodging one another and going about their business. Levie is wearing a bright, cherry-red sweater. When he asks if the room's sandy floor poses any problems for sound, Craig responds that it's "great" and does a little soft-shoe.

Melinda joins us on the set, neatly dressed in a trim, dark blue suit. While I never see any sign of difficulty from her, Lawrence the transportation captain has told me that he feels that she is passive-aggressive, faking helplessness in order to be catered to. Not having had much interaction with her, I can't say one way or the other.

While Tobe and the crew prepare to shoot, David, Molly, and Todd work together to rig fluorescent lights under the slatted aluminum floor of what's come to be known as the "star chamber," the actual claustrophobic and foreboding bomb shelter in which Brian and Peggy will be shuttered.

Brian Bremer arrives to the stage and calls me over for a chat. Even though tonight is his big scene in the bomb shelter, he seems relaxed and eager, without a hint of nervousness. I give him my sketchbook to help him pass the time until his call.

Poor Nancy seems to be constantly the butt of the crew's practical jokes. She carries a folding chair with her everywhere she goes, presumably so she can sit herself down in any convenient spot. Cruel though it may be, I must admit that I can think of few things funnier than seeing Nancy standing on the stage directly beneath her precious chair hanging from a rope above her head, plaintively asking, "Has anybody seen my chair?"

During an early rehearsal, the lighting effect of the bomb fails to illuminate, and Dale slips instantly into military mode, "Misfire, misfire! Clear the blast area! C'mon there, Chief, let's heat it up!" then, after the slightest pause, "Fromage weenie." (Which I take to be a more discreet way of calling someone a "cheese-dick.

Tobe has a conversation with Guy about the shockwave effect. Tobe feels that the burst from an air mortar is too concussive for the much-longer blast that he desires. Guy suggests using one of the high-powered fans instead and sprinkling some fuller's earth (a dusty, sparkly mixture of silicone and aluminum flakes, often found domestically in kitty litter) in its path to give the flurried air texture. Tobe enthusiastically agrees, a good example of what I've observed to be his flexibility and openness to the contribution of others.

I watch 1st assistant cameraman Dana Gonzales at work and am struck by the precision of his craft. Pulling focus is a difficult and often thankless job, but essential and one that Dana performs with unquestionable skill.

Dick Butkus is here, but in this scene is little more than an extra. He stands at the back and reacts when the blinding light and force of the powers through the bunker's reinforced observation slits. Between takes, Dale adjusts the insignia on Scott's uniform, ever the military advisor.

All the actors don pitch-black goggles as Tobe tells them to "look right at the middle of that big white reflector." The sun is represented by a large round disc, covered in Scotchlite, a highly reflective material. When light is shone into it, it bounces back many times brighter, producing an intense, white-hot beam. This, along with the wind from the fan, salted with particles of fuller's earth, results in a convincing atomic storm.

After one exceptional take, Tobe exults, “That was pretty damn good! That looks *scary!*”

On his way to the set, in his wardrobe of olive-drab coveralls, Brian returns my sketchbook, which I had earlier provided to him, looking forward to his contribution. To my delight, he’s done an impressionistic drawing of a towering mass of bodies undulating together in something resembling an orgy(!).

The pranks continue as I notice AC Monica Silvera unknowingly walking around with a sign taped to her back that reads, “I’m *wet!* Are you *hard?*”

From across the set, I hear Todd’s boisterous voice: “Fetch me another cabin boy, this one’s *full!*”

Steve Brooks takes 2nd assistant cameraman Brian Bernstein and pyrotechnician Guy Faria upstairs to the screening area to shoot some fire effects. They mount a propane torch on top of a C-stand, then attach a large transparency of a film frame from Sam’s struggle with Cagney in Marsh’s office onto the camera lens. Looking through the viewfinder, Steve adjusts the size and angle of the flame to match up with the coinciding attributes of the image. It requires great patience to get it right, but in the end, they’ll get a clean plate to superimpose on the original image, making it appear as if rockets of flame are shooting from Sam’s shoulder.

Meanwhile, in Tony’s workshop, Craig is fondling the collapsible dummy, whispering into its ear, “Who did *you* have to sleep with to get this job?”

Tony manipulates the controls to have the dummy slap him.

The “star chamber” set is narrow, cylindrical, and modular, so that sections can be removed for easy camera access. The dolly is set on plywood that extends into the chamber, assuring a smooth roll. This upcoming shot will be the first image of the film, a slow reveal of the interior of the shelter.

Due to the importance and complication of the shot, the setup is painstaking and time consuming.

After designating a series of countdowns to get the timing right, they’re finally ready to roll.

Levie takes a deep breath, rolls his head, and shakes his shoulders to relieve tension, murmuring, “Gotta get into the *zen* of this.”

Best boy grip Richard Crompton removes his shoes to operate the dolly in silence.

Tobe calls Eric close to the camera to videotape, saying, “This is the place to be. It’s history.”

Paul calls for quiet and the stage is deathly still.

The shot begins on a swirling crimson nebula illuminated by glowing brushstrokes of light. As the focus sharpens, the image remains maddeningly indistinct. Is it a genie? The camera continues its slow retreat, revealing the mirage to be nothing more than the burning filament of a plain red light bulb. As the long, languid shot settles finally onto a vintage record player, a red vinyl record descends to the turntable and the needle drops into its spinning groove.

Everybody holds their breath.

“Needle drop?” whispers Tobe.

“Yep,” Levie answers.

“Good?”

“Yeah.”

Pause.

“Well, print it.”

And there is a collective sigh of relief.

We wrap again near midnight. Brian is released having barely been used, but cheerfully takes it in stride, having learned already in his short film career that sometimes that’s just the way it goes. He asks to take the sketchbook with him so that he can add a few more drawings. On a related note, my drawing in today’s call sheet is of a little guy tossing a pie across the bottom of the page at another little guy’s face, partly inspired by Sergio Aragones’ “marginals” from Mad Magazine.

Friday, March 17, 1989 - Day 15

Dailies were screened after-hours last night. We watched all the footage from the cinder block room. Dana received a well-deserved round of applause for his excellent shifting focus work in the party scene. There were a few scattered groans when watching Andre de Toth casually remove Brian’s skull. The conference room sequence looks just as I imagined it would: hazy and dark and moody. Seen only as a darkly veiled presence, Olander’s appearance is aptly described by Darrel as “brooding.”

Arriving about noontime, I can't help but notice how drastically things change from day to day on Stage 4. The remnants of the radio have been piled up into a far corner, Brian and Peggy's living room has been redressed as a hospital room, and the conference room walls are being reconfigured into a hallway for Olander's mansion interior. There is plenty of bustling energy as construction teams and paint crews disassemble and scavenge parts of one set for use in another.

Today is St. Patrick's Day and most everyone wears some sort of green on their person. Tobe is particularly in the spirit with his turquoise button-down and olive undershirt. Brian and Stacy's matching army-green coveralls are inadvertently appropriate. The craft service table has a large bowl of bright green M&Ms on offer.

The day's shooting begins in the blast shelter. In the tense moments before the bomb detonates, Brian nervously winds his father's gold watch as his wife straps herself into one of the glorified tin can's shabby bucket seats. Brian kneels before her and connects electrodes to her neck, chucking her chin in a fruitless effort to comfort her, then takes his own seat and belts himself in.

Tobe instructs Brian as they roll, "Let me see your hand tremble," watching every move with keen attention.

Many problems arise in shooting the scene: boom shadows, timing the actors with the camera moves, and an unidentified hum that Tobe really rather likes: "Mm, that actually sounds kinda neat!"

Stacy is quite wonderful in the scene, her dark eyes wide with fear. Brian, it seems to me, is an interesting casting choice. Not conventionally good-looking, he has nevertheless an attractive boyish quality, fresh-faced and corn-fed, more Huck Finn than All-American.

Steve Neill is here with his articulated latex hands to be used later tonight in shooting the initial stages of Brian and Peggy's combustion. He talks a blue streak about his obsession with modeling and flying remote-controlled aircraft, even having gone so far as to write a treatment for a proposed film revolving around the world of the RC hobbyist. Steve Brooks is peeved that tomorrow's scheduled effects shoot has been cancelled, but Neill just shrugs it off.

While the members of the crew busily prepare for the big blowup, Eric and I wander around the stage with the video camera, taking in the sights. Tobe huddles with Paul and Richard McGuire. Tony lays out the constituent

parts of his collapsible man like a do-it-yourself kit for Eric to photograph. Craig and Adriano lounge at the sound cart. Tobe's assistant Rita blows us a kiss. Electrician Molly Cheshire inventories the lighting equipment, laid out in neat piles on the stage floor. Kat sits quietly working on tomorrow's call sheet (on which I've done a drawing of a flaming film reel). Upstairs, production secretary Lisa Van Cott dances in the outer office, Rochelle waves to us exuberantly, and producer Jim Rogers reassuringly declares, "Everything is going fine here in the production offices!"

Before the big effects sequence, they shoot close-ups of Brian and Stacy in fearful anticipation of the impending explosion. Brian is quite good, but Stacy stuns the crew with her committed performance, crying actual tears as conflicting emotions of love and terror do battle in her eyes.

They're about to move on, but somebody notices that the red practical lighting was off during Brian's close-up, so they're forced to reshoot. Unfazed, Brian steps up and rises to the occasion, giving a performance that everyone agrees is far better than his first effort.

At the other end of the stage, set decorator Ann Job and her team are dressing the set for the interior of Nina's home. It's shaping up to be a cozy place, decorated in warm tones and chestnut colors, with cherished mementos on the hearth and lace doilies on the piano. (The piano, by the way, is the same one seen in the radio station scene. Waste not, want not.)

Baby Hinkley makes his triumphant return to the stage. By law, the infant may only be available for a very short time, so the camera crew moves to the set of the 1955 hospital room to shoot Peggy cuddling with her newborn son. This also gives the grips, electricians, and prop team the time needed to prepare the shelter for the complicated effects of the bomb's impact.

The sunny yellow walls of the room comment ironically on the tragedy to come, but for the moment, mother and child rock gently together as the loving father looks on. Still in his green coveralls, Brian is there in support of Stacy's performance. Although off camera, he gazes at her and the baby with watery eyes and undisguised devotion. Stacy sweetly sings the baby a lullaby written by the director of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The cast and crew rehearse again and again in anticipation of the upcoming scene. Tobe first wants to shoot the entire scene in one long master, beginning in a medium two-shot of Brian and Peggy, pulling back as the countdown continues to reveal the stark grey confines of the shelter,

tilting up to capture the rusty steel beam as it collapses, then back down as the walls rattle and the floor erupts in flames.

There are a lot of moving parts and consequently progress is slow. With numerous lighting cues, smoke effects, mechanical effects, physical effects, and of course, the actors, it's a boondoggle just waiting to happen. Levie suggests that they try a system of assigning numbers to coordinate (David interjects, "In *The Dirty Dozen* they used a phone!"), but that approach creates more confusion than it curtails, and is quickly scuttled. They settle on having Paul call out instructions—"Shake!...Split!...Flash!"—which works much better. Still, the rehearsals continue.

I sit on the sidelines with Steve Neill. He's been up for eighteen hours and is skeptical that they'll get to his shots tonight. He moans about the delay and laughs uproariously every time he hears Paul call for "*just one more rehearsal!*"

Steve vacillates between feeling that "If we're gonna do it, let's just do it quick and dirty!" and the realization that the already shagged-out crew probably wouldn't be too thrilled at facing a complex effects shot at 4:00 in the morning.

Virtually trapped on the set, Brian and Stacy wait patiently at the center of the storm. Viewed from above, the bomb shelter is a hub of activity and an oasis of light in the otherwise-dark soundstage.

As is to be expected, it requires many takes to get a satisfying result. Tobe sees everything, and often unconsciously "conducts" the scene like a maestro, with infinitesimal hand gestures and sympathetic body language. He sometimes whispers to the actors, but often elicits urgency with his clipped cries of "Look at him! *Look up!* Look over here! *Reach out to him!*" And then the ceiling caves in and the grid beneath their feet surges with smoke and flame.

It's a long, involved, exhausting process that seems to have no end. Each take seems to begin at a higher pitch, with Stacy in particular becoming increasingly drained as the night goes on. Although it arguably verges on sadism, her fatigue only serves to lend greater depth to the reality of the scene.

The last take is especially horrifying, with all the elements finely tuned; white lights rise as Levie's high camera booms low, Brian and Stacy shake violently in their seats as the camera shudders, smoke fills the chamber, the roof beams split, threatening to crush the hapless pair, and a fireball bursts

from below the floor, all accompanied by Stacy's pitiful gasps and whimpering sobs.

"Cut! *Great!*"

At 3:30 am, Paul finally calls it a wrap. Predictably, everyone gets a second wind when craft services breaks out the wrap beer.

Saturday, March 18, 1989

The week's dailies are screened at 4:00 pm at the 1800 Building on Highland Avenue in Hollywood for anyone who cares to attend. The screening room is plush and luxurious, the sound and images crisp and clear, a marked difference from our usual unrefined situation at the stage. Some eyebrows are raised when gaffer David Hayball and electrician Molly Cheshire arrive together, all gussied up and ready to party.

The only footage new to me was the Landis material. His performance is great, but the hit of the day are the shots of his burning dummy slamming against the window over and over. Tobe is very pleased with the rushes, once again thanking everybody for their hard work and dedication.

As we prepare to leave, David and Molly ask Levie if he'd like to accompany them on their night out.

Levie politely declines, saying, "No, my wife specifically told me when I left, 'Don't go out with David and Molly!'"

Sunday, March 19, 1989

Tobe's 1979 television miniseries *Salem's Lot* airs tonight on channel 13. I've seen it many times, but I watch the whole thing and it still unnerves the hell out of me.

WEEK FOUR

HOME COOKIN'

Monday, March 20, 1989 - Day 16

No Monday morning blahs here. We arrive bright and early at 8:00 am, ready to tackle the day. I'm greeted by Brian Bremer, in powder-blue blazer with his hair slicked down and parted razor-sharp, who returns my sketchbook. He's filled eight pages with esoteric illustrations of corpulent bodies intertwined in orgiastic human chains. Clearly, the boy has a lot on his mind. This is to be his last day, and while he's sad to go, he looks forward to directing a stage production of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play *No Exit* back at Pepperdine.

First up is Scene 19: Brian enters Peggy's room bearing the gift of a large red hatbox. She opens it, but unable to contain his excitement, Brian removes from the box a shiny toy carousel,

"David's first present."

They embrace, sharing a moment of great joy shortly before unimaginable disaster strikes.

The day begins with a bit of a hiccup. It appears that nobody notated the kind of flowers, nor their position on Peggy's bedside table when they shot Stacy and the baby, and through some oversight there are also no continuity photos. Luckily, I shot the scene on video, so they have the tape to refer to and it all ends happily.

Peggy's hospital room is festooned with congratulatory flowers. Bright morning sunlight streams through the window blinds. A gift card accompanying one colorful arrangement is inscribed "Burn, Baby, Burn! Tomorrow it will be your turn!"

Across the stage sit the burnt and disintegrating bodies of Brian and Peggy. From my vantage point high above the hospital set, I can

simultaneously see two versions of the young couple, one blissfully alive and one tragically deceased.

Brian as Brian enters the room, charmingly befuddled, giddy at the prospect of fatherhood. It's a relatively simple shot, with a nifty pan as Brian crosses to the bed. Despite the fact that Marc the accountant spoiled a take by lead footing it all over the stage, they get it in the can with a minimum of fuss.

They quickly reset for Stacy's single. In her modest nightgown and with her hair tied with a white ribbon, she beams with the glow of a new mother. The camera floats on the boom above the bed and glides forward as she opens the gift and reads Brian's inscription on the enclosed card. They share a hope for a luminous future.

Brian's close-up is next. They remove a wall to accommodate the lighting and to give the camera more freedom of movement. Stacy sings the lullaby off camera as he fixes his big eyes adoringly on her. The shot begins on the carousel sitting on the bureau, then slowly pulls back to reveal Brian large in the foreground. He is perfectly still, seemingly doing nothing, though his eyes well up with tears. Overcome, he takes out his father's watch, winding it and regarding it with admiration. It's a simple, enchanting moment.

They move on to do a "beauty shot" of the carousel. It's a pretty little artifact, shiny and candy colored, merrily spinning its tiny tin horses around and around as it plays a strangely melancholy tune.

I'm told that Stacy must catch a flight this afternoon for another gig. She says that she must leave by 3:00, "so they'd better kick some ass!"

I have a feeling that she's going to miss that flight.

Melinda arrives to the set in her clean white smock. In this section of the scene, as Peggy's temperature is taken, the attending nurse takes the baby, accidentally causing the thermometer to snap. Alarmed that Peggy might ingest some mercury, both Brian and Nina rush to her aid. Is the mercury a catalyst for the horror to come? A silver teardrop earring is the droplet of liquid metal that Stacy spits out. Tobe makes certain that Brian wipes his *right* hand on his lapel when saying, "I got some on me." As Peggy waves "bye-bye" to little David, she cannot know how final that fond farewell is.

Lunch is called at about 2:00 pm. In reviewing my journal entries from last week, I notice that I've been remiss in notating lunch breaks. My

excuse is that everything has been such a blur, I can barely keep track of the time. While I intend to do better, I make no guarantee that things will improve going forward.

Two cameras have been set up favoring Stacy in bed. The actors play the “mercury bit” from these new angles up until the moment of Peggy’s ignition. The flurry of hands and arms in the shot brings to my mind the image of Kali, the multiarmed Hindu goddess.^[17]

Steve Brooks operates the second camera. At one point, he takes a generous tumble, but recovers nicely. He seems a bit frazzled, what with the pressure of all of the day’s scheduled fire effects.

Tobe announces, “Okay, we’re ready for *fire*!”

A great deal of preparation is required for this series of effects shots. Guy runs tubing from a smoke generator up the sleeves of Steve Neill’s molded latex hands. The hands are also rigged to a propane source, so that when the time comes, the fingertips will burst into flames. Neill and Tony Hooper will manipulate the hands while Stacy hides hers from view. When they roll, they’ll have a lot of balls in the air.

In order to avoid confusion when both Steve Brooks and Steve Neill are on set, the nicknames “Steve A” and “Steve B” are implemented. Unfortunately, since Steve B. is designated as “Steve A,” it only serves to increase confusion rather than allay it, and is dispensed with altogether.

Tobe asks for a test of Guy’s system and is not at all pleased. The generator hums but no smoke spills from the tubes—it backs up instead, filling the room with billowing exhaust.

Looking through the viewfinder, Tobe says, “Can’t see a thing for the ambient smoke!” When Guy tries to downplay the problem, Tobe goes on, “That’s a bad system. It’s just a *bad* system!”

Stacy has perhaps the most difficult job, having to act with propane jets flaming just inches from her face. She spends a lot of effort trying to perfect the illusion of the artificial hands.

Levie tells her, “It’s all in the shoulders! When those hands move, your shoulder moves!” and he’s right.

Tensions are high. Tobe is getting a little heated himself. After asking several times for a furniture pad for Stacy’s lap, he snaps at the crew, “Where’s the goddamn thing? Just tell me where it is and I’ll get it *myself*!”

During rehearsals, Guy’s smoke effects are not delivering the goods.

Tobe makes no effort to hide his dissatisfaction. Watching through the camera lens, he deadpans, “Any smoke yet? Nope. Plenty in the next room but none out here! Need to get in there with my cigar!”

It’s funny, but no one dares to laugh.

Tony and Steve kneel on either side of the bed to operate the articulated hands. For this first take it will be smoke only, no fire.

As the cameras roll, Tobe shouts instructions to Stacy: “Look at the hand! Quick, look at Nina, look at Nina, *quick!*” as well as to Tony and Steve, “Raise ’em *higher!* Closer, closer to her face! A little more articulation!” shrewdly keeping everyone uncertain and off-balance, creating a sense of urgency and immediacy. After they cut, he says eagerly, “All right, let’s burn ’em!”

Levie’s itching to go, saying, “Okay, this is the money shot!”

Tobe explains how it’s going to go down: “We light ’em and I’ll talk, ‘Right hand up. Left hand. Left hand down. Right hand quivering...and screaming.’” Before they roll, Tobe mutters disapprovingly, “Shadows all over the friggin’ place!” for no other reason, I think, than to ramp up the tension.

Nothing could have prepared Stacy for what she is about to endure. When they are lit, the hands burn furiously hot. They blaze and wriggle literally before her eyes. Melting latex drips off, setting the pad in her lap on fire. Her screams escape in little spurts and gasps. It seems ghoulish, but can there be any doubt that her close proximity to the actual fire brings an unguarded realism to her expressions of terror? It’s harrowing and difficult to watch.

After what seems an eternity, they finally cut, and Stacy buries her face in her hands. Paul asks if she’s all right.

Clearly rattled, she nevertheless manages to squeak, “I’m...I’m *fine!*”

Steve Brooks is not completely satisfied with the effect, and makes his opinion known, but there’s nothing to be done about it.

Stacy’s final shot of the film is, appropriately, her character’s last living moment. Also triggered to combust, Brian leaps into Peggy’s arms and together they ride a blazing chariot to paradise. (Um, too poetic?)

The shot is almost too easy to accomplish: a blast of smoke, Brian hurls himself into the bed, “Cut!” and suddenly Stacy is done. As she makes her exit, there are many fond kisses and tearful goodbyes. Brian has reserved

for her an especially lingering hug, and then, like a vaporous mist, she vanishes into the night.^[18]

The rest of us are not quite finished. There still remain a few more effects shots to conquer. Leslie takes Stacy's place in the foreground of the next shot, in which Brian helplessly witnesses Peggy's dire predicament. Leslie is required to brave the same experience that Stacy had, enduring suffocating smoke and radiating heat at close quarters, as Brian watches with wild eyes. Leslie holds up rather better, I think, than Stacy did. The same can't be said, however, for the latex hands. They melt away before the shot ends, leaving behind only a bare, skeletal armature.

This next shot requires a bit of actual sleight of hand. A tube runs smoke from the generator up through Brian's coat sleeve. Brian stares in amazement at his own fuming hand, then lowers it out of frame. Tony in turn replaces it with the sculpted latex replica, spewing fire and gesticulating wildly as Brian shrieks and recoils from the flames. The trick, as Levie said earlier, is in the actor's shoulder movement, but also in his ability to motivate the action. Brian sells it like a well-practiced charlatan.

At the end of his last take on the show, Brian flourishes his handkerchief as a magician might and fans himself cool like a shy debutante. He receives a rousing round of applause from the clutch of gathered onlookers. And that's a wrap for Brian.

On his way out, Brian makes a point of finding me to tell me goodbye and to invite me to attend his play at Pepperdine University. He's such a nice guy. I hope I get to see him again.^[19]

Brad Dourif puts in an appearance, casually dressed in black leather jacket, motorcycle boots, and dungarees. Though it's only been a week, it feels like forever since we've seen him. He was originally scheduled to work today, but his scenes have been pushed until tomorrow, much to the relief of the company. The day's nearly over and they still haven't completed the first scene on the call sheet. Brad mingles with the crew and wanders around, checking out the multitude of sets in varying stages of construction or demolition. He is particularly fascinated with Tony's mechanical man, which Tony proudly demonstrates for him.

The crew sets up to shoot Melinda's side of the scene. Since Stacy has been released, Leslie again stands in, even going so far as to sing the lilting lullaby for Melinda's reaction shots. Baby Hinkley reappears, crying

practically all the way through his takes, which gives Melinda a fit of the giggles.

Nina watches in horror as her dear friends are reduced to ashes right before her eyes. With its shimmering light effects, rising tide of smoke, popping flashbulbs, and melting switch plate on the wall, the sequence is much more complicated than it seems on the page. Take after take is required before the elements fall into place. At the center of it all is Melinda's heartbreaking performance. The bright flashes seem to physically repel her and she has difficulty letting go of her emotions at the end of the scene.

Brian is gone but his hand lives on. Paul calls for the "martini," a large close-up on Brian's burning hand with Nina cowering in the background. Two cameras roll at slightly differing angles. Squatting in front on the cameras, Tony operates the hand, holding it directly in front of one lens, flexing the articulated fingers, shifting to the other camera, then back and forth as Tobe directs. The cameras continue to roll until the thing burns away to nothing but a smoldering stump.

That's a wrap. It's only 9:30 pm but feels much later.

Dailies are screened upstairs after wrap, and while they're as beautiful and entertaining as ever, I'm afraid that I've been spoiled by the opulent screening room in Hollywood.

Tuesday, March 21, 1989 - Day 17

Arriving to Stage 4 at 10:00 am, the scene is set for Nina and Sam's fateful reunion. Ann Job and her team have outdone themselves in dressing Nina's modest home. The décor is best described as "grandmotherly," with matching chintz upholstered chairs, commemorative plates hung on the wall, a woven rug underfoot, and assorted bric-a-brac, all serenely color-coordinated in warm, autumnal tones. Huge Klieg lights have been erected behind the walls of the set to provide moonlight through the windows.

Melinda has aged quite a bit in the last twelve hours. Her aging makeup is actually quite subtle. Her powdered hair is loosely wrapped in a bun, her face has a slightly grey pallor, and there are tiny crow's feet around her eyes and thin downturned lines at the corners of her mouth. Her wardrobe consists of a plain black blouse, charcoal skirt, and dowdy ash-grey sweater. There is no trace of the experimental physicist of Nina's younger days.

Brad sits on the set as Bill Miller-Jones touches up his makeup. Sam is in bad shape at this point. In the scene, he's just come from the hospital, where's he's left Cagney behind in a festering heap. His arm hangs limp at his side. Having overheard Nina's phone call to Dr. Persons on his car radio, he intuitively seeks her out.

This is Brad and Melinda's first and only scene together, which should bring an appropriate tentativeness to their interaction. In fact, I'm not altogether certain whether they have ever even met before this morning. Tobe's plan is to shoot this section of the film sequence, so that the performances evolve naturally.

The first shot is artfully designed. The porch light casts Brad's shadow on the wall as the front door is opened. Brad and Melinda then enter the frame as she takes his hand and guides him in. To achieve the desired effect, Brad's stand-in Adriano stands in the doorway and casts Sam's shadow while Brad and Melinda wait off camera for their cue. In a way similar to Cynthia's stunt driver exchange in front of the emergency room, it works seamlessly. Plywood has been laid on the floor to assure a smooth dolly roll as Levie pans Brad and Melinda into the room.

Melinda's voice retains only the barest hint of an accent. Her gait is slow, and she shuffles as she walks, befitting Nina's advanced years. They play the scene quietly, low and slow, the polar opposite of most of the film's feverish, high-pitched sequences.

Nina gently leads Sam by the hand into the kitchen, where she finally gives in to her emotions, lamenting, "Oh, God! David, what have they done to you?"

Brad tells Tobe that "What really makes me wobbly is being called 'David' by Nina."

Tobe instructs Paul to have the crew keep their voices down, so that they "can stay at this level" of intimacy.

Struck by the unusual silence, David Hayball seriously asks, "Is the baby on the set?"

Meanwhile, back on the hospital room set, Steve Brooks and his second unit have nearly completed their preparations to shoot Brian and Peggy's charred corpses erupting into a blazing inferno.

Cynthia Bain drops by, bringing her brother along for a visit. She's gaily dressed in a peasant blouse, denim skirt, and stylish straw hat. It's odd

to see her out of her usual wardrobe. She tells me that they've come to watch the bodies burn.

Sam and Nina's first meeting gets more refined as Tobe confers with the actors between takes. By the end of the fourth take, Tobe is unmistakable moved by their performances, referring to them both as "award-winning!"

We break for an early lunch around 3:30 pm. Tony works on the cable-driven mechanism controlling his flammable articulated man, offering up its full range of movement for Eric and me to check out.

When Eric instigates, "Make him flip out, Tony!" the dummy flails around like a drunken break-dancer.

Brad and Melinda sit at the kitchen table as the crew buzzes around them, setting up for the next series of shots. Brad is in a good mood. When medic Molly Malloy hesitates about whether or not to cut his shirtsleeve for makeup effects, he urges, "Cut it! Be *bold!*" Later, attended by Molly as well as the hair and makeup personnel, he makes Tobe laugh by saying, "I swear, I've never been fiddled with more in my *life!*"

The scene is staged simply, with both Nina and Sam at the table as she bandages his wounds. This lengthy exchange between them contains many shocking revelations and requires a delicate touch. Melinda has a palpable world-weariness about her as she reveals Sam's true nature and the implausible circumstances surrounding his birth. Her performance is so nuanced that I can almost see the long-repressed memories simmering up from her unconscious. With her querulous voice and bifocals sitting low on her bleary eyes, she convincingly conveys the impression of a much older woman. The makeup is incidental.

In the hospital room, two burnt bodies cling together in a death clutch. Guy and Duncan have rigged them to ignite using a sparking device and bundles of flash paper. Though technically a 2nd unit shot, Tobe takes the helm. The first take is fantastically good. Guy primes the shot with spurts of smoke, Steve Neill and Tony manipulate the writhing dummies, Steve Brooks yells "*Flash!*" and a blinding fireball sets them alight, to enthusiastic cheers and applause from the crew.

"Great!" exclaims Tobe. "*That's* what SHC is all about!"

As great as the effect is, it's only the beginning. Propane nozzles are affixed inside the bodies and set to spout like blowtorches. Brooks suggests to Tobe that they over-crank the camera to slow the bursts. After

considering it briefly, Tobe tells him to go ahead and shoot it at the standard rate of twenty-four frames per second.

Tobe clears the room of all extraneous persons for the next spectacular flameout.

“We’re really gonna toast ’em now!” says Steve Brooks.

The camera rolls, Guy lights up the dummies, and they explode in blazes. Pulsing jets of fire surge from the thrashing figures and sweltering waves of heat shimmer in the air.

“Love it!” someone calls out as the bodies burn and burn, filling the room with smoke.

When they finally cut, everyone watching cheers and applauds as Guy extinguishes the flames.

“Good!” shouts Tobe above the fray, “That looks *scary*!”

On one wall, a sign is posted that reads “Hot Set!” Normally meant to indicate that a set is currently in use and must not be touched, in this case it seems to have a special providence.

The crew regroups to shoot Nina and Sam’s transition from the kitchen to the living room. All the furniture has been swept aside to allow the camera dolly greater mobility. It’s another deceptively simple shot with almost imperceptible camera moves, beginning on Melinda seated at the table and pulling back as she slowly rises and ambles into the living room, then settling into a medium close-up on Brad as he follows her in.

After hearing Nina’s litany of incredible tales about his ancestry, Sam hardly knows what to think. He questions her veracity, insisting that he retains memories of his parents, so they couldn’t have died on the day he was born.

“How do I know you even knew my parents?” an incredulous Sam demands.

“You don’t,” comes the soft reply.

But before they can get to the meat of the scene, the day comes to an end. Paul calls for a wrap at 11:30 pm. We meet here tomorrow to take up where we left off.

Wednesday, March 22, 1989 - Day 18

Wow, déjà vu. Everything is exactly as it was when we left last night.

It's about 2:00 pm and shooting continues on yesterday's uncompleted scene. As Sam protests Nina's assertions about his past, she pays him no mind as she takes a portable movie screen from her closet and sets it up in the middle of the room. They get the shot quickly and move on to the more intricate and emotionally complicated section of the scene.

Tobe, today wearing a *Salem's Lot* T-shirt, has just this morning written a new speech for Nina. In it, she tells the story of a how group of Tibetan monks on the outskirts of Hiroshima survived the effects of the atom bomb. Through chants and prayer, they presumably created a "psychic force field" that shielded them from the blast. ^[20]

Lou Perryman (aka Lou Perry) stops by the stage. He is a friendly, grizzly bear of a man, a buddy and colleague of Tobe's since before the *Chainsaw* days. He was a cameraman on *TCM* (in fact, he photographed the iconic last images of the film), played a small part in *Poltergeist*, and is probably best known for his role in as LG in *TCM2*, a jolly Texas gadabout who meets an unspeakable fate. Lou gives Levie a big hug. They are also good friends from their early days back in Austin.

When asked if he'd like a beverage, Lou points to Tobe and says, "Hell, I'll rassle *him* to the ground for a free soda!"

Richard McGuire and his team dismantle the star chamber while prop guys Bill and Frank undress the hospital set, an example of how quickly things can change around here. While the production team is at home sleeping, the construction crews work through the night.

When I comment to carpenter and painter Lance Simco how jarring it is to be greeted practically every morning with another new, fully realized environment, he tells me, "Well, if you start out to build 'sets,' that's what you get. If you start out to create reality, *that's* what you get!"

In the next section of this touching scene, Nina drags a heavy storage chest from the closet, lifting its lid and explaining to Sam that its contents belong to him. Sam rummages through the chest, discovering a cache of artifacts that stir up restless memories: a plastic toy ball, a ticking metronome, and the melted remnants of the once-gleaming toy carousel, which surprisingly still functions.

As they prepare for a close shot on Brad, Tobe shares a long conversation with him regarding the particulars of the scene. At the end of their far-reaching discussion, Tobe defers to fate: "Let's just do it and see what happens."

There is a little consternation about the closet's "unmotivated" light source. It seems to glow from below in a way that no closet in the real world ever would. Levie shrugs it off, predicting that no one will notice.

Brad's playful mood from yesterday continues today. Despite the intensity of the shot, before they roll he says in a boyish falsetto, "Levie! Levie! Is this where you want me to be?"

"We're on a bell!" calls Paul, and the stage falls silent.

Tobe quietly says, "Action."

Brad kneels before the chest, plugs in the carousel, and switches it on. His eyes widen in amazement when it starts to spin, its tiny horses rising and falling in halting, herky-jerky movements. "Look!" he whispers, and loses himself in wonder and unexplainable nostalgia.

During the last take, Tobe sits back in his director's chair and watches from a distance, something he rarely does. "*Cut*," he says very softly. "How was it, Levie?"

"That was my favorite," Levie answers.

They reset for a single on Melinda as she relates the story of the Hiroshima monks. I've gradually learned that so much of filmmaking technique requires "cheating." When the camera angle or focal length of the lens is changed, the placement of the actors and properties must also necessarily adjust to maintain continuity of composition. So, the chair in which Melinda sits is considerably closer to the camera than it had been in earlier shots. As usual, Melinda gives a lovely performance, nuanced with barely discernible hints of Nina's own less-than-benevolent motives.

Carin has spread her designs for the crew jacket over the piano for Tobe's stamp of approval. Rather than the conventional logo on the back of the jacket, Carin instead opts for an embroidered emblem over the right breast, patterned in part after Leonardo da Vinci's famous etching of the proportions of man.

For the next setup, the grips lug the hulking industrial projector usually reserved for screening dailies downstairs onto the set. In the scene, while Sam is entranced with the carousel, Nina feeds an 8mm spool of film into her ordinary, consumer movie projector. Somewhat abstracted, she waves him over to watch her home movies. The actual 35mm footage of Brian and Peggy frolicking in front of their new home is to be projected through the larger machine.

Second assistant cameraman Brian Bernstein operates the large projector. To create the impression of a deteriorated reel, he punches holes in a length of unexposed film leader. While cleaning the components of the projector, he looks into the lens of an imaginary camera and launches into a mock testimonial for “Filmmaker’s Anonymous.” “I started out making eight-millimeter films only on Saturdays. I didn’t think I was hurting anybody but myself.” Suppressing a sob, he goes on, “Then, I moved on to sixteen-millimeter. I...I just couldn’t control myself. I lost my house, my job, my family...!” then dissolves into crocodile tears.

I have no clue what the context is, but I overhear Tobe tell Paul, “Keep the producers off the set!”

Eric and I have a long, in-depth conversation with Lou. He and Eric worked together on *TCM2*, so they spend a little time catching up. From there, the discussion ranges widely from the *Chainsaw* films to *Eggshells* (on which Lou was assistant director) to Lou’s stage career (he recently appeared in a production of *The Legend of Hank Williams*) to his first meeting with Tobe and his musings on Gunnar Hansen and Ed Neill (respectively Leatherface and the Hitchhiker in *TCM*). There’s even talk of the possibility of his doing a cameo in *Spontaneous Combustion* as Nina’s nosy neighbor. Lou is a man utterly lacking in guile. It’s a tired cliché, but in this case absolutely fitting.^[21]

First AD Paul Moen is unexpectedly forthcoming about his wayward youth as a musician. He was one of two drummers in a nine-piece garage band called Beer. Later, he and two other members regrouped into what he calls a “power-trash band” dubbed Elvis Presley and The Beatles. Another incarnation of this band, made up exclusively of Detroit white boys, was ironically named “The Negroes.”

On his way to shoot the fire effects for John Landis’ blasted knee, Steve Brooks approaches me and asks why he never sees me writing anymore. Is he nuts?

Upstairs in the wardrobe room, Robinson models several different options for Carin to consider as the style of the crew jacket. He has a particular favorite, black with white vinyl sleeves, and he’s not shy about putting in his two cents. Carin seems to be leaning more towards a lightweight cotton, but also in black.

They’re ready with the next setup. Nina screens her home movies for Sam. Brian and Peggy appear onscreen, full of life and looking forward to a

bright future. Inexplicably recognizing them from his fever dreams, Sam now knows that what Nina has said is true.

Nina interjects during the movies. “That’s *you!*” she offers when Peggy unashamedly displays her prominent belly.

Sam is transfixed by the flickering images of his parents, ghosts of the past, and seeming most affected when he recognizes their shiny new Studebaker as his own. When the film reel flutters out and Nina goes to shut the projector off, Sam rises from his chair. Overcome with emotion, he collapses to the floor in a dead faint.

The dolly is on boards for a smooth quiet ride. The camera moves for this shot are fairly intricate, choreographed to counter the moves of the actors. Beginning on Melinda as she switches the projector on, the camera pans with her as she moves to her chair, then dollies forward to catch Brad as he enters the frame. As he sits, the dolly moves back just a touch to settle on a view of the movie screen, with Brad framed large in the foreground.

Lou has brought a lady friend with him to the stage. Just as they’re getting ready to roll, she sashays carelessly through the set, oblivious to everything going on around her.

Paul is compelled to announce, politely but firmly, “Uh, we can see into the kitchen...and we don’t like noise!”

Tobe rides the dolly, watching intently and massaging his beard with thoughtful strokes. During the shot, Brad comments on images that are not on the reel but which will be added later, in particular the white-hot reflected lights mounted on the camera as Brian catches himself in the mirror. What little dialogue there is will no doubt have to be overdubbed later because of the loud clattering of the 35mm projector. They shoot several takes, with only miniscule variations that I can see. After about the sixth take, Tobe seems satisfied, and they move on to prepare for the next setup.

Between setups, Tobe meets with Melinda and Brad over by the carpenter’s workbench in a far corner of the stage. Obviously looking for some degree of privacy, Tobe has Kat act as a sentry, keeping everyone at a fair distance. Apparently, Melinda has some strong thoughts about the upcoming scene. Brad paces the stage floor while Tobe and Melinda engage in an animated (some might say voluble) exchange.

On a temporary plywood wall jimmied up against the workbench, someone has spray painted, “DON’T FEED THE ANIMALS.”

Second meal is a great spread of chicken, spaghetti, and lasagna. And I've achieved a milestone. I'm now officially a fixture on the set. Evidently, I'm missed when I'm not around.

The hour is getting late, but they have a go at the next sequence anyway. Sam has awakened from his faint and recovered somewhat from the shock that sent him reeling. Seated on a divan in Nina's living room, he struggles to come to terms with his newfound awareness. As their conversation goes on, however, it's Nina's turn to discover some dark secrets.

The camera favors Melinda. She listens *so* intently as Brad speaks. When she slowly comes to the realization that Sam's benefactor is in fact her old boss, industrialist Lewis Olander, his words hit her like a thunderbolt.

In terms of rhythm and pace, each take differs greatly. Tobe and Melinda must have resolved any conflict that they may have had regarding the shape of the scene with a compromise.

At the end of the second attempt Brad says, "Now you got two different versions."

"Absolutely," Tobe agrees.

Brad plays the scene with Melinda full-bore even though he is off camera. As Sam, when he confirms Olander's dominating presence in his life (responding to Nina's direct question with the mildly absurd, "Yes! My ex-wife's grandfather!"), Melinda reacts as if she's been slapped in the face.

At the outset of what turns out to be the final take of the night, Tobe directs Melinda, "Tired, okay?"

Head hanging low, she says, "That's going to be easy. Wipe the makeup off my face and you'll see!"

The scene plays beautifully, but she gets so caught up in the moment that at the end she gets flustered and loses her concentration.

The performances are quite good, but the entire scene is too complex and too byzantine to get a satisfactory result so late in the day, so it's decided that they'll revisit it tomorrow.

I'm not sure what the actual wrap time was, but I arrive home at 4:15 am and fall directly into bed.

Thursday, March 23, 1989 - Day 19

Every day that Eric and I drive into Valencia, we see at the freeway exit a discarded cardboard sign reading “Phoenix → ” presumably left behind by a hitchhiker. Of course, it’s a request for a ride to Phoenix, Arizona, but today for some reason what arises in my mind is the image of the flaming bird of ancient myth.

Arriving to the stage at 6:00 pm, the first thing I notice is that the set to Lisa’s apartment has magically grown a limb. A long hallway has been added, seemingly from nowhere.

Tony is in his workshop making final adjustments to two articulated dummies. They are scheduled to burn outside tonight, standing in for the policemen that become the victims of Sam’s unleashed fury. In anticipation of the sequence, there are five police cars lined up at the back of the stage. However, there is considerable doubt as to whether there will be enough time to get the shots before the sun rises.

In Nina’s living room, the camera is fixed on a close-up of Brad. At the top of the scene, he is more and introspective and still than in his off camera performance last night, yet more intense. You can almost see his temperature rise as secret after secret is exposed to the light of day.

Brad makes a suggestion that Levie wholeheartedly endorses. They begin the shot close on Brad’s hand clutching a handkerchief as he inspects a photo of his parent’s “dream house” in his lap. He raises the handkerchief to his rheumy eyes and the camera follows, settling into a large, intimate close-up on his face. Tobe loves the idea as well, praising Brad for its economy.

“That’s what I’m here for, Boss!” Brad quips.

Between takes, Melinda sips bottled water and hums to herself. Yesterday was meant to be her last day, but she’s been held over to complete her scenes. I’m told that she absolutely must finish by today, as she’s scheduled for an immediate departure to Eastern Europe. While she relaxes with Nancy off the set between setups, I manage to make her laugh. As she softly murmurs her lines about the gold watch, intoning the name, “Brian Bell,” I chime in, “Bell? Hm, that name has a familiar *ring*!” Her giggle makes me smile for the rest of the day.

Brad still suffers from a rash on his arm due to the latex in the effects makeup. In an example of his dedication to the project, he has chosen not to seek treatment until principal photography has ended, explaining, “Whaddya’ gonna do? It’s the movie!”

Adriano sits on the sidelines with his face buried in a copy of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

In the scene, Sam rises to his feet at Nina's mention of "Modern Technologies," which he takes to mean Lewis Olander's corporation, "Modern *Atomic* Technologies." His anger grows as he realizes how his entire life has been orchestrated by an invisible conspiracy. When the gold watch in his pocket chimes, he instinctively retrieves it, piquing Nina's interest. She recognizes it his father's and points out to him the tiny, engraved initials, "B. B." for Brian Bell. This proves too much for Sam to handle, and he rushes from the house as Nina pleads with him to stay—a possible indication that despite her innocent façade, she has an agenda of her own.

Brad does his patented nose scrunch in preparation for the shot, imagining the heat brewing inside him. When the camera rolls, he seems barely under control, conflicted by confusion and outrage. Fearing another explosive catastrophe, he storms out, with Melinda's pitiful "Come back!" echoing in his wake.

I watch Tobe as he inspects one of the many props cluttering Nina's piano, a clear crystal apple. He holds it up to his eye and scans the room, fascinated by its light refractions and distortions. He's inspired to relate the story of a man who apparently wore a pair of glasses custom fitted with prisms instead of lenses, which inverted his view of the world upside down. In a month's time, so the story goes, the man's brain somehow corrected for the inversion, and he began to see the world upright through the prisms. Conversely, when he removed the glasses, the world was again upside down.

Jon Cypher is on set, dressed in his black, secret agent trench coat. This scene marks the continuation of a sequence that was shot eons ago in Altadena, where stuntman Greg Gault stood in as Marsh and skulked up to Nina's front door as the Studebaker raced away.

Scene 81: Nina's doorbell rings. Assuming that Sam has returned, she opens the door and is met with a spray of gaseous mist. Wheezing and gasping for air, she tumbles to the floor as Marsh enters, his face obscured behind an ominous protective mask.

Even before they roll on the first shot, there is a glitch. The sprayer that Cypher is meant to use to dose Melinda clogs easily. It's the joint responsibility of the art department and pyrotechnics, so prop man Frank

Bertolino and Guy Faria confer to solve the problem. Despite their best efforts, they never quite manage to get the spurt that Tobe hopes for.

Additionally, Jon is having trouble with the phrase “DX sanction” in the script, although it’s clearly a coded term for “assassination,” “termination,” “murder,” take your pick. In deference to Cypher’s bewilderment, the line is changed to “death sanction.”

They shoot a wide master in which Cypher enters, lowers himself to the floor, taunts Melinda briefly, then gets back to his feet and proceeds to wander around the room gathering up assorted bits of incriminating evidence and packing them into a silver trash bag before he strides out the door. But something’s not quite right. It’s awkward and goes on far too long. Tobe calls for an early lunch at about 10:30 pm.

Tobe’s assistant Rita approaches me and asks if I happened to videotape that last take. Of course I had, and she asks for the tape, saying that Tobe needs it to review the scene. I retrieve the video camera, cue up the tape, and run it upstairs to his office.

I return from lunch to see that the scene has been substantially reworked. Gone is the silver trash bag and Marsh’s wandering around the room. I’m told that Tobe reviewed the videotape with Levie, Paul, and Jerry Lambert and together they revised the action.

When they reshoot, the scene plays much smoother. Cypher heedlessly steps over Melinda’s body and goads her into surrendering to the effects of the gas. The dialogue is truncated, curt. The whole thing is noticeably improved. Only one take of the master is necessary.

They move swiftly on to Melinda’s close-up. Levie lies on the floor beside her and operates the camera. She slumps to the floor, her eyes bleary and her breath faint and raspy. Curled into a semi-fetal position, she drifts into unconsciousness as Cypher steps over her and strides out the door. At the end of each take, the crew busies themselves for the next shot and Melinda just continues to lie dead on the floor. Even Paul steps over her.

Levie lies on his belly with his eye to the viewfinder. The camera sits on the floor at an upward angle for Jon’s close-up. He looks almost comical in his cartoonish gas mask, but when it is removed, exposing his grim visage and his black-on-black eyes, he is positively malevolent.

Tobe is extremely pleased with the result. He thanks Jon and roams the set, merrily muttering to himself, “Very good, very good.”

Back behind the stage, Levie and his team reconnoiter the location where the unlucky policemen are set to meet their fiery doom. A phone booth has been set up and the cop cars placed, but it's unlikely that the shot will come off tonight.

The first and second unit crews both work on the next setup. Nina's hospital room is cold and blue and forbidding. It stands in stark opposition to Peggy's warm, inviting room in the distant past. Lisa has come to the hospital in search of Nina, whose comatose body Lisa had discovered back at her house. Hoping to get answers to her questions about Sam, she finds instead a deeper mystery.

The camera move Tobe has planned is excellent. Starting at the back of the room, it dollies forward as Lisa enters. Now low at the foot of the bed, it booms up painfully slow, then snaps forward into a close-up as Melinda sits up. Also, Steve Brooks will cover the shot with his camera mounted on a tripod.

When Craig points out a ventilator's cool accordion-like movement to Tobe, he responds, "Yeah, uh, but the thing is she's dead already."

Not so easily dismissed, Craig posits, "Well, she could be on life support."

Melinda is a ghostly presence. Her face is deathly grey and her hair hangs loose about her shoulders. Her character is possessed by Sam's vengeful, disembodied consciousness. The room lights flicker and the phone rings inexplicably. When a startled nurse screams, "But you were *dead* two minutes ago!" Melinda rises wraithlike from the bed, declares "Death to all traitors!" and emits a frighteningly hollow, humorless laugh. Taken out of context, the scene is very confusing.

When they roll, Melinda pulls out all the stops, leaving Cynthia with little more to do than gawp.

Levie says it all: "That's bloody perfect!"

Melinda likes it too and does a little victory dance.

Tobe tells her, "Now, for this next shot you're going to have smoke up your skirt," which makes her giggle.

The first unit assembles across the stage at Nina's house to shoot the continuation of a sequence that was filmed at the exterior location in Altadena untold centuries ago. Upon receiving no answer to her knock at the front door, Lisa goes around to the side of the house to look for a way in. It's a relatively simple setup. The camera dollies alongside Cynthia as

she creeps up to the kitchen window. She looks in, tries the screen door, and enters the house. Two takes and they're ready to move on to the "martini," although someone is defiantly unhappy with all the long hours, chanting, "Every single day! Every single day! Every single day!" Even a second meal of Swedish meatballs can't placate the complainer.

Melinda's last shot of the show is wicked. A mannequin's torso has been sliced in two. The front half has been draped with a hospital gown that matches Melinda's. She steps up to the torso as if it were her own. Guy pumps smoke up through the gown and it streams from her collar and creeps along the contours of her face. Flash bulbs and a fan complete the illusion that Nina is dissolving into fuming tendrils of smoke.

Although technically a second unit shot under Steve Brook's direction, Tobe has been bouncing back and forth between the two sets and is here to watch. They roll. Caught in the frenzy of smoke and wind and flashes of light, Melinda attains a kind of ecstasy, basking in the blue storm that whirls around her. Steve calls, "Cut!" there is thunderous applause and calls of "Great, great!" and all at once Melinda is done.

In a time-honored tradition, Paul presents Melinda to the crew for a final bow, and there are kisses and hugs and teary goodbyes all around.^[22]

Not quite finished for the night, the first unit captures a very brief shot of Cynthia stumbling upon Nina's nosy neighbor, played by extras coordinator Pat Gallagher. (I guess that Lou Perryman wasn't available after all. Bummer.)

Brad, who has been waiting in the wings for about ten hours now, steps up into the mannequin torso. I'm led to understand that his image will be interlaced with Melinda's in a series of rapid flash cuts illustrating Sam's invasion of Nina's lifeless body. They shoot basically the same effect as with Melinda, except that through the onslaught Brad's face remains locked in a leering, grotesque joker's grin.

It's a wrap at about 6:30 am. We're a whole day behind schedule. Not one item listed on today's call sheet was actually shot. Instead, the entire day was spent playing a game of catch-up. The sun is nearly up. No cops shall burn tonight.

Friday, March 24, 1989

It's Good Friday, and officially designated a "day of rest." Regardless, much of the crew gathers at Stage 4 to take part in shooting the complicated tableau of sunrise over the blast bunker. Since this is not considered a scheduled shooting day, there is no call sheet. Instead, Kat has handwritten a shot list on a legal pad, to which I've added a quick pencil sketch of the bunker with a huge round sun looming over the horizon.

Yesterday, when I left the stage, the sun was up. Today, when I left home to return to the stage, the sun had already set. Tonight, we will spend hours watching the sun rise. It's disorienting, chasing the sun.

It's about 9:00 pm and preparations are well underway for this very important sequence of shots. Though only occupying a relatively small corner of the stage, the set is expansive. The desert miniature includes a forced perspective view of a distant mountain range, where the high tower that supports the bomb is represented by a twenty-four-inch model. Cacti and desert weeds clamor over the dusty dunes. The mountains are lit with a purplish hue and the cyclorama glows in pale shades of blue and amber. The glow from within the bunker casts sharp red lances of light across the landscape.

Todd and his grips stretch a broad diffusion screen in front of the desert tableau like a tennis net. The screen, coupled with copious billows of smoke and clouds of diffusion spray, will serve to create the eerie effect of thick, early-morning haze.

Tobe prowls the set with his keen eye, attentive to every detail, no matter how small. He tells Richard McGuire that the set needs a horizon line, something to suggest a wide plain in the foreground. A large piece of painted plywood should do the trick.

David is upset. "There's a wrinkle in that fuckin' cyc! [cyclorama, a painted panoramic background]" he complains.

It turns out that there isn't.

At the opposite end of the stage, in his capacity as 2nd unit director, Steve Brooks oversees the shooting of assorted inserts in Nina's living room, assisted by 2nd AC Brian, PA Sean, and an intern named Mark. Their first shot is a moody image of Nina's antique cuckoo clock as the moonlight casts the shadow of a rustling tree across its face. When Levie comes over to check on their progress, Steve facetiously suggests an absurd Dutch angle, as used by Alfred Hitchcock in his archly expressionistic shots of

stuffed birds in *Psycho*. Levie plays along, indulging Steve's lighthearted mockery but diplomatically proposing a more restrained approach.

The stage lights are shut off, so Tony putters in his workshop under a bright work light. His animatronic dummies are now in uniform. Tony uses the extra time he's been given to make improvements to the mechanism that controls their movement. Their increased mobility lends them a more human quality. The real question is, how long will the cables and servos hold up under the brunt of intensely hot fire?

Laid out on a table nearby are three dime-store mannequins dressed in dark blue coveralls. I suppose that they're meant to be placed outside the bunker as test dummies for the bomb blast.

Three background players are on set, one dressed as an MP, another as a reporter, and the last, wearing a dark suit and black overcoat, is probably intended as a shady government operative. They stand behind a barricade just outside the entrance to the bunker, watching the sun rise and waiting for the countdown to commence. The reporter operates an authentic 1950s newsreel camera, pointed at the horizon to catch the corona when the bomb detonates.

All of today's shots are MOS (silent), so no sound recording is required. I imagine that Craig and Cameron are thoroughly enjoying their day off.

1st AC Dana points out the multiple filters inserted in front of the camera lens, explaining to me their individual properties and the specific ways in which they complement one another to achieve a desired effect. For this shot, they're using four filters in addition to the on-set diffusion.

Every member of the electrical crew wear jackets bearing the logo "EGO Lighting," David's independent lighting company.

While adjusting the tiny tower on the horizon, Richard tells me, "This is my favorite set. I really like the model stuff."

I agree, adding, "Because it's impossible."

"Yeah," he says, "I like doing things that no one else can do!"

The setup is long and painstaking, but well worth the wait. When they're finally ready to roll, the set is a marvel of heightened reality. The atmosphere is relaxed, not only because the sunrise is the sole focus of the night's shoot, but also the fact that no one is officially on the clock.

Taking a last look, David makes a minor adjustment to one of the arc lamps and calls out to Tobe, "How's that lookin', chief?"

Tobe replies with, "That looks *great*, man!"

“Okay, well, we’ll try harder,” David says with a smirk.

All the elements are in place. The stage is hushed. Godlike, Tobe commands the sun to rise. The camera is lifted high on the boom, looking down on what appears to be a vast desert plain stretching out for miles. Paul gives the cue and the sun, an eighteen-inch Scotchlite disc operated on a cantilever, slowly creeps over the horizon. David operates the spotlight, directing a beam of light onto the disc at a precisely calculated angle, reflecting brightly into the camera lens and causing the artificial sun to shine like a burning star. One degree off and the effect is ruined.

Tobe is hilarious when directing the background extras, keeping them completely off-balance with his shouted instructions: “Don’t move your bodies, but look around at one another. Stand still! Look at each other! *Stand still!*”

They roll on take after take until Tobe is satisfied. The air has a layer of misty grey from all the smoke and aerosol spray. Before they move on, everyone wants to have a look at the shot through the camera lens. Tobe is only too happy to comply.

David can’t resist a snarky remark: “But is it *art*?”

Upstairs in the spacious screening area, a table has been set up and an excellent meal of beef stroganoff is served.

Over at Nina’s place, the second unit continues shooting inserts: the creaky 8mm home movie projector, a tinny music box, and all of Nina’s “home movies,” including Brian’s birthday party, projected onto the portable screen.

Brian chomps on a cigar, looking a bit like Groucho Marx. He tells me that the guys have pooled their resources and bought a box of Havana cigars for Tobe because, he says, “he’s such a nice guy!”

The Panavision logo on the second unit camera has been altered to read “TobeVision.” Mark the intern nearly drops the camera housing, almost giving Brian a heart attack.

In our first real conversation, camera assistant Monica Silvera tells me that she used to be a “Raiderette,” a cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders. She’s also been the target of many practical jokes during the shoot, including having her bicycle plastered with dozens of “In-N-Out Burger” stickers, a favorite source of fun for the crew. In his cubicle, using letters from several of the stickers, Tony has cobbled together a sign reading “Urge To Burn.”

On the back of one of the plywood walls to the Olander set currently under construction, someone has spray-painted the peremptory warning, “Focus sharp or go home!”

The interior of the bunker is saturated in red light. Looking through one of the narrow observation slits in the wall, the camera is focused on the horizon. The room is tightly packed with people.

Sitting in a corner and looking a bit tired, David moans to Tobe, “There’s no coffee. It’s like *Das Boot!*” referencing Wolfgang Petersen’s claustrophobic film about an ill-fated German U-boat mission.

Tobe laughs, observing, “It *looks* like *Das Boot!*”

The grips lay out a long set of dolly tracks for the last shot of the night, a rapid rush toward the bunker’s exterior. Virtually all the preparation has already been done in readying for the earlier shots, so the setup is quick. The air is still thickly layered with smoke, so several members of the crew wear surgical masks. The set is quite beautiful, with its dusky pink sky and red rays radiating from within the bunker like streaks of laser light. During the shot, prop guys Bill and Frank engage in a game of “tumbleweed toss” for the benefit of the camera.

Tobe loves every minute of it. At the end of the night, he’s still as full of energy as when it began. He practically bounds up the stairs to his office.

Strangely, sometime during the course of the night, production assistant Sean William’s hair has been restyled into a “Flock of Seagulls” coiffure.

I have no conception of the time, having watched the sun rise again and again. I’m shocked to learn that it’s 7:30 am. Walking out into the morning light, the sky is overcast but the sun is out.

Saturday, March 25, 1989

I watch director Gary Sherman’s *Poltergeist III* on videotape. It has its moments, but overall, it’s a pale imitation of Tobe’s original.

WEEK FIVE

MODERN LIVING

Monday, March 27, 1989 - Day 20

Today is transportation captain “Buffalo” Bob’s birthday!

After enjoying a quiet Easter holiday, we regroup at 9:45 am in Valencia Studio’s Stage 4. The noise from the construction crew’s buzzing saws and whacking hammers echoes off the walls while the production team sets up the first shot.

We’re back in Nina’s hospital room to shoot Cynthia’s angle of Scene 119: overwrought, Lisa rushes in to find Nina lying on the bed, pleasantly chatting on the phone. An awkward attempt at conversation is quickly derailed as Nina’s oddly malignant behavior only distresses her further. Scared and confused, she runs from the room.

The shot features a curious bit of cheating. Using wooden boxes and seat cushions, together the art department and grips construct a mock-up comprising just the foot of Nina’s bed, designed to slide away at the proper moment, allowing the camera to pass. (“I’ve always wanted to do this!” says Todd as he loudly staples a cushion to a box. Ka-chunk!) In essentially the reverse of the angle on Nina, the camera creeps forward and slowly rises, seeming to float impossibly across the surface of the bed into a tight close-up on Cynthia’s frightened face.

Brad is on set in his motorcycle togs. As Melinda is now nothing more than a memory, he’s agreed to perform Nina’s lines off camera. Not having seen Melinda’s performance, his readings are very different—more forceful and staccato, less ephemeral.

Eric is wearing a *Child’s Play* T-shirt, but Brad has yet to notice. (In that film, Brad plays the role of serial killer Charles Lee Ray as well as

providing the voice for Chucky, the wholesome doll mystically invested with Ray's murderous personality.)

On screen, the shot might appear to be a simple one, but the lighting plot is very complex. The room is a forest of C-stands topped with Klieg lights, flags, silk mesh filters, and bounce boards.

While waiting to roll, Cynthia casually drags on a cigarette, something I've not seen her do before. The first few takes go well, but Tobe wants Cynthia's reactions to be bigger. Brad offers to bolster her with something over-the-top to react to, but she politely declines.

Cynthia seems to draw inspiration from the air around her. In the next few takes, she is breathless and brittle, her big blue eyes dart around the room, keening wildly from frustration to bafflement to fear. Brad's sharp, accusatory interjections give her plenty to work with. That, and the clattering sound of the nurse's aluminum tray crashing to the floor again and again. Not to mention the blinding spark of brightly popping flashbulbs. After four takes, Tobe is happy and satisfied. We're done here.

The company moves upstairs into the production office's restroom. On his way through the office to the set, Tobe sees Craig crashed out on the couch. "Don't you ever get any *sleep*?" he asks.

As Todd carries equipment up the steep steps to the office, he huffs, "Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit snorting glue!"

In the script, after a particularly prickly lunch meeting at a trendy café with his condescending ex-wife and the insouciant Dr. John Marsh, Sam is also stuck with the check for a meal he never had the chance to eat. As he sits fuming at the table, the tip of his index finger inexplicably bursts like a firecracker. He rushes into the bathroom, locks himself into a stall and inspects his festering wound.

Tobe makes his Alfred Hitchcock-style cameo appearance in this shot. As Brad scrambles through the door and into the bathroom stall, Tobe can be glimpsed sparking up a cigar at the sink. Above the urinal, a large handwritten sign is posted reading, "*Do Not Flush* when red light is on or bell sounds!"

Looking down from the stairway landing, the stage looks to me like a busy construction site. Olander's foyer has expanded and looks to be nearly ready for the painters. A crude skull and crossbones has been stenciled on one of the backing flats. Lisa's apartment has grown by leaps and bounds,

pretty nice digs to manage on a teacher's salary. In discussing it, Eric and I decide that the cost is low due to its proximity to the nuclear power plant.

There have been and continue to be many schedule changes as a result of the production falling behind schedule. Production designer Gene Abel, generally agreeable, grumbles about the readjustments that he and his crew are required to make in order to accommodate the modifications. To be sure, it must be hard on the crew not knowing what surprises each day may hold.

In Nina's living room, Steve Brooks and his "B-team" continue to shoot inserts of assorted bric-a-brac.

While the camera crew are upstairs, the art department redresses Nina's hospital room as the high school nurse's station and doctor's office. In the script, this scene immediately follows Sam's encounter in the bathroom. Sam has returned to school and visits the nurse to get his finger bandaged. In the anteroom, he encounters young Jennifer, sick and ill at ease. Unable to explain how his injury occurred, the nurse directs Sam to the school doctor, a medical hack that Sam mistrusts.

Judith Jones has returned to her role as Jennifer. No longer the fresh-faced girl seen earlier, she is now pale and drawn, her hair is limp, and dark circles sag beneath her eyes.

The brief sequence begins with a close shot of Brad's cauterized finger, courtesy of makeup man Bill Miller-Jones. The camera pulls back to reveal Brad being examined by the sarcastic school nurse (played by Judy Behr, who I'm led to believe is a close friend of costume designer Carin Hooper). The nurse has one of my favorite lines in the script: Sam expresses his reservations about the doctor, telling her how he had once told Sam that his tonsils should be removed, when in fact they had been extracted as a boy.

She responds with the sardonic, "*Maybe they grew back.*"

The camera sits low for Brad's single, essentially shot from Judith's POV. When Sam catches sight of Jennifer waiting to be seen for treatment, he retrieves the gold watch from his pocket and displays it to her with a kind of triumphant sneer.

Quick to realize her sickly condition, he grows suddenly concerned, asking, "Are you all right?"

Either too ill to stay or hoping to avoid an awkward confrontation, Jennifer skitters away.^[23]

Mark Roberts is a middle-aged gentleman who has come to film acting fairly late in life, but his steady professionalism is undeniable. He plays the role of Dr. Simpson with blustery indifference, suspecting Sam of deviously seeking permission to leave school. He is word-perfect in every take.

In order to create a night exterior within the confines of the stage, a large space has been cordoned off with a huge drape of duvetyne, a light-absorbing black fabric. The diffusion screen is stretched across the area and a long string of lights seems to extend into the distance. A telephone booth has been placed at the center in anticipation of shooting one of the most important, pivotal sequences in the movie.

Scenes 84–90: Having just escaped Nina’s home, Sam aimlessly drives the deserted night streets, his brain reeling with desperation and paranoia and dark fears of hidden conspiracies. Uncertain of where to go or what to do, he turns to the only person that he knows he can trust, his girlfriend Lisa. He spies a phone booth at the side of the road and screeches to a stop. His call to Lisa is fragmented, twisting from relative lucidity to tragic delusions of cosmic power. “I’m *not* Sam! I am the Son of Samson, a thermonuclear bomb! I am *David*, the apocalyptic death man!”

UPM Sanford Hampton and co-producer Jerry Lambert have made a promise to the grips and the electrical crew that we would wrap tonight at precisely 9:30 pm, so time is short.

Brad paces the set, wending his way through and around the milling groups of crew members, psyching himself up for the long, emotionally demanding scene. He wants them to shoot the rehearsal, and Tobe and Levie concur.

Paul is agitated. “Gotta go right now, guys! *Right now!* That, or *go home!*”

Cynthia sits on an apple box right beside the phone booth to read Lisa’s side of the conversation. Duncan uses a mole smoker to fill the set with late night fog.

Tobe calls “Action!”

As the shot begins, the camera dolly rolls along the smooth surface of the stage floor, executing a long, delicate curve around the booth.

Brad’s performance is electric. His voice scales the peaks and valleys of the dialogue like a coloratura. He seems always on the precipice of losing control, regaining his equilibrium only to again succumb to encroaching madness with evangelical fervor. He reaches a pinnacle of passion when

Sam's suspicions of Lisa's duplicity are confirmed, crying, "If you're in on my kill, then *fuck you!*"

Tobe calls "Cut," but Brad is dissatisfied. He'd like to go again right away.

Unfortunately, David reminds Sanford of their agreement, saying adamantly, "This is it. You got 9:30. A promise is a promise!"

And so, we wrap for the day at 9:30 pm, to revisit the scene first thing tomorrow.

Tuesday, March 28, 1989 - Day 21

Inauspiciously, today is the tenth anniversary of the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island.

At 1:00 pm, the company reassembles on the stage to complete shooting of yesterday's aborted scene. The construction crew left the place a mess, so quite a lot of time is spent in tidying up. It all works out for the best, however, since the upshot is a restructuring of the scenic elements, making the nighttime environment not only more visually appealing but also much more convincing. A park bench has now been placed in the vicinity of the phone booth.

A second stationary camera has been situated at the approximate end mark of the dolly move. Additionally, the camera move itself has been changed to execute a wider arc around the booth, settling into an angle face to face with Brad as his fever rises and his suspicions proliferate.

Fumes from the last few days still linger in the air. Hacking coughs echo through the stage, prompting someone's cheeky observation, "It sounds like a TB ward in here!"

Frank from the prop department buys all the dimes in my pocket for Brad to use in the pay phone.

They roll on the day's first attempt. Cynthia once again sits on a box with her back up against the phone booth to feed Brad his cues. Steve Brooks and 2nd AC Brian operate the second camera. The dolly swiftly and gracefully circles the booth. Brad's performance is good but to my mind not as inspired as last night's. Tobe cuts the roll early and calls Brad to the side for a discussion. When they return to the set a few minutes later, Brad is deeply introspective but clearly primed for action.

There is a frustrating false start when Craig detects the thrum of an airplane passing overhead.

On the next take, as Brad dials, he mutters rapidly under his breath, “Be there, be there, be there...” something he hasn’t done before. Over the course of the phone call, his temper rises more relentlessly and burns twice as hot. The sweat pouring from his forehead and the mucus running from his nose are not makeup. When he conjures up Nina as “my nuclear nanny,” his maniacal laugh is bone-chilling.

Each time they cut, Brad wanders off into the darkness to gather his thoughts in solitude. As soon as he’s ready to go again, they immediately proceed with another take. Brad seems stricken with fever. Hot flashes and icy chills wash over him as he struggles to fend off encroaching madness.

Cynthia’s performance is excellently well modulated, providing the spark that arouses his fervor. Lisa’s stubborn inability to empathize with Sam’s plight drives him further into lunacy and grandiose delusions.

“The Earth is *sick!* There are *unnatural atomic blisters* on her skin!” Sam preaches, propounding a metaphor for the proliferation of nuclear power plants around the globe.

The shot ends with Brad’s hideous howl of lament upon realizing Lisa’s traitorous betrayal of Sam.

“Cut!” says Tobe, “That’s the one! That’s a beauty!”

“Beauty!” echoes Levie.

Even Brad seems content, agreeing that it’s his best effort so far. I thought his performance yesterday was great, but today’s effort is superlative, so fastidiously constrained when it could have so easily soared way over-the-top.

While the crew resets for another angle, wardrobe assistant Janet Sobel asks for my help in composing a letter of recommendation for her. This week she has a job interview and wants to be fully prepared with a document signed and approved by Tobe. Together we’re able to whip it up in no time at all.

Todd has rigged a police strobe light bar onto a tow trailer to be used in tonight’s exterior shots.

Out back, Tony has wrapped the heads of his “dummies built-to-burn” in aluminum foil and coated them in black spray-paint. Theoretically, when the bodies go up in flames, the paint will act as an accelerant and the foil will prevent the latex heads from melting into goo too quickly. Steve Neill

joins us and rambles on and on about how the Freon gas in the aerosol spray is depleting the planet's ozone layer and the government conspires to suppress the facts and something about a secret campaign to conduct antigravity tests which are indisputably ongoing... it all just makes my head hurt.

The next setup is tricky, featuring a simple but effective illusion. In the script, Sam's rage swells so profoundly that a fireball inexplicably bursts from his eye. In the shot, Brad faces away from the camera, while on the other side of the phone booth's glass partition a piece of flash paper is ignited. When Brad reacts, jolting his head back as the blast of flame occurs, the effect is startling.

Lunch at about 7:30 pm. Several people comment that they never see me writing anymore, which I find bizarre, as it seems to me as if I never *stop* writing. I make a mental note to have my journal (which has come to be referred to as either the "Infernal Journal" or the "Cook Book") more conspicuously on display.

The atmosphere in the stage is positively toxic, so it's literally a breath of fresh air to move outside, even if it is only a block down the street. The phone booth is set on a cement island adjacent to a small grassy area. The shrubbery, trees, and park bench from inside the stage have been relocated into this new landscape. We're here to shoot Sam's arrival to the spot as well as the grisly aftermath of his disastrous phone call.

Today's call sheet encourages the crew to "dress warm!" for the night exteriors, and it's no joke. It's cold and breezy out. Happily, thanks to craft services, coffee and hot chocolate are on hand to keep the chill from getting a foothold.

For the first shot, Brad drives the Studebaker. As Sam roams the night roads, losing his grip on reality more and more, he imagines himself to be a sort of new age, postnuclear messiah. He spies the phone booth, inspiring a momentary return to reason with his decision to reach out to Lisa.

While waiting for the Studebaker to be equipped, Tobe, Brad, and Levie pass the time exchanging jokes and making small talk. Tobe shares with Brad his opinion that, after watching a videotape of the application process, he much prefers the makeup on his arm wound in its earlier stages, with his veins appearing as if visible through his skin. Brad sees his point but asserts that there's nothing to be done about it now. With Steve Neill standing nearby, they make a special effort to keep their voices low.

The wagging antennae on their headsets make Todd and the grips look like Martians from 1950s TV sitcoms. Eric and I amuse ourselves and annoy them by making endless “beep beep” noises as they pass by.

Finally, they’re ready to go. While Brad sits behind the wheel, Levie shoulders the camera in the passenger seat, his backside sticking out the car’s open door. Tobe sits in the back beside Craig, with his portable recording unit slung over his neck.

Nancy follows along in the production van, communicating with them via walkie-talkie. As they pull away, the Studebaker has some difficulty maneuvering a simple U-turn across the unusually wide boulevard. Eventually they’re able to squeak by and they drive off into the darkness.

While on the road, they shoot the whole of Brad’s messianic monologue. They return to the site roughly an hour after having left. As the camera rolls, the vintage automobile chugs to the stop in front of the hastily erected little rest stop. When Brad emerges from the car, I can hear Tobe’s muffled “Cut!” from the recesses of the back seat.

With the dialogue shots behind them, they now need only the tail end of the sequence, a POV from inside the car as it pulls up to the phone booth. After a brief conference with Paul, they hit the streets again, making several passes until Tobe is satisfied.

Funnily enough, each time the car grinds to a stop at the curb, crew members flock to the vehicle like gnats to flypaper.

The equipment is quickly removed from the Studebaker. To shoot Sam’s arrival at the booth from an outside perspective, the camera is mounted on a tripod in the street.

After a quick wipe down from the art department, the car speeds off with Brad at the helm. In his first attempt he executes a perfect take, hitting his marks precisely, which thrills Levie (“Oh man, I can’t believe it!”) and relieves Paul, who’s been checking his watch all evening.

The camera is next placed at the right quarter-panel of the car for a closer angle on Brad’s exit.

Tobe is determined to get just the right billowy cloud of smoke to pass through the shot at just the right moment, but the wind stubbornly refuses to cooperate. He urges Guy and Duncan to overcompensate with their mole smokers: “Big, big wallops! Big cloud rolling in!”

On the very next take, the wind shifts propitiously and a great rolling cloud of mist swirls around Brad, enveloping him like a warm hug.

“*Cut! Print!*”

In preparation for the upcoming shot, Steve Neill applies a swollen prosthetic eyelid over Brad’s own eye, so that when he turns to the camera, the grotesque residual effects of his exploded eyeball will be revealed.

Like an old song on a broken record, there are grumbles from some of the crew about the long hours. Paul’s not too happy about it, either. I hear him utter these immortal words: “Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck!*”

Dolly tracks are laid out on the lawn for this visually complex shot of the police converging on Sam in the wake of his fiery oracular dysfunction. The first inkling of trouble is the reflection of a police cruiser’s flashing red lights in the glass doors of the phone booth. As the camera slowly dollies across the lawn, the approach of a second cruiser is seen through the booth’s glass partitions, its roof lights radiating bursts of blue and red. Like reflections on the surface of a multifaceted diamond, the result is a kaleidoscopic funhouse mirror of pulsating colors and intersecting lines. Unbelievably, this potentially thorny shot comes off on the first take without the smallest glitch.

Stunt coordinator Greg Gault plays the officious cop in the last setup of the night, looking great with his well-pressed uniform and frowning visage. I wouldn’t want to be pulled over by him on a dark road in the middle of the night.

Sam has slowly and painfully made his way to his car when a police officer steps up to the window, gruffly requesting his license and registration.

In no mood to be trifled with, Sam asks coldly, “You *sure* you want it?”

When he hands the cop his license, a spark of electricity passes between them and the cop’s arm erupts in flames.

They cover the scene from two angles with great economy. Greg is quite good in the role, especially his “Aieeee!” when his hand is set afire. (It’s really only a spark and a flash of light. As I understand it, the real flames will be added in postproduction visual effects.)

When the shots are in the can, Tobe is happy, Paul is happy, the crew is happy, and everybody can go home. It’s nearly 4:00 am.

Tony’s dummy cops were actually transported to the location in anticipation of filming their flaming consummation tonight, but time has run out. Once again, they’ve been put on the back burner, so to speak.

After wrap, Tobe calls Eric and me over to ask our opinion of whether or not the character of Sam should die at the end of the film. Evidently, he's recently read an article decrying horror film clichés and wants to sound us out about what we think. He's quick to add that he doesn't consider *Spontaneous Combustion* to be a horror film in the traditional sense, thinking of it as more of a metaphysical thriller.

In the script, Sam ultimately vaporizes into oblivion, but the impression I get is that Tobe is seriously considering allowing him to survive. I venture that he should go through with his original plan to kill him off, citing the disappointing ending of Ken Russell's otherwise brilliant film *Altered States* as an apt comparison. Tobe agrees that in that case, it is in fact an unconscionable cop-out.

Wednesday, March 29, 1989, - Day 22

The Academy Awards are being broadcast tonight. It's just after 6:00 pm and the first Oscar has already been awarded to Geena Davis for her ditzzy supporting role in Lawrence Kasdan's *The Accidental Tourist*.

A hallway adjacent to Lisa's apartment has miraculously sprung up overnight. The décor is stark and modernist, tastefully appointed with charcoal-grey carpet, highly polished black minimalist furniture, and silver and crystal art deco wall sconces that light the hall in cool shades of blue. Situated at the end of the hallway is a small elevator with sea foam walls and marbled forest-green molding. The entire color scheme is vaguely aquatic.

The scene takes place relatively early in the script, so Brad is in his "handsome" stage, with only his burnt index finger as a portent of the torment to come. After anxiously trying to get Lisa on the phone from home, he decides to just show up at her apartment unannounced. When he arrives, he is upset to find that his keys are missing. Fortunately, Lisa steps from the elevator before his anger takes hold.

Tobe is impressed with the elevator and is generous with his praise. "That's a damn good job on this door after just asking for it yesterday!"

For the day's first shot, a temporary wall representing the lobby is slid between the elevator door and the hallway. Production accountant Marc Kunis does a mercifully brief walk-on as the building's security guard. He looks woefully out of sorts in his ill-fitting uniform. The sum total of his

role consists of him straightening a picture on the wall and offering Brad a weak little wave as he boards the elevator.

Steve Neill is living out his own personal Oscar drama. His ex-wife Ve Neill is nominated in the makeup category for Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice*. Steve believes that Rick Baker should get the award for his impressive work in transforming Eddie Murphy into a multitude of characters in *Coming to America*, but is convinced that Ve will win because, "it's all political."

The next shot begins on a large close-up of Brad squeezed into a corner of the elevator, clearly distracted while waiting for the car to stop. Eventually, the door slides open and he marches into the hall. Levie rides the dolly behind him, moving slightly forward as Brad exits. Brad goes to the door of the apartment but cannot find the key, so he proceeds to empty his pockets onto a love seat in the hallway. As he does, the camera resumes its forward motion, slowly inching toward him.

It seems to be a simple setup, but the first hurdle is that the elevator door sticks. Frank is responsible for its operation, but being only temporary, there are no rails or grooves to assure its smooth movement. A bit of sandpaper and some elbow grease effectively resolves the problem.

The next hurdle is Brad's timing. Tobe thinks that he's taking too long at the door before moving to the love seat. Brad's position is that Sam would likely knock and wait to see if Lisa answers, but Tobe insists the Sam knows that she isn't home and that his real problem is that he can't immediately produce the keys. They don't argue. They just exchange viewpoints. I've noticed over the weeks that their relationship is one of mutual respect and admiration. Of course, in the end Tobe gets his way.

Brad defers to him cheerfully. "You got it, Boss!"

When they roll on the shot, the camera leads a small parade. With Levie operating, Dana has to leap onto the dolly to get through the narrow elevator door while Todd pushes from behind. (Since there's no room for anyone else in the tight space, Dana must slate the shot as well as pull focus.) Cameron follows, feeding cable to the rig (a boom mike is impractical, so a microphone is attached to the dolly), then Nancy with her bulging script in hand and finally Paul bringing up the rear. Everything eventually falls into place, and they get the shot in about five takes.

Cynthia has arrived and seems to be in an ebullient mood.

While they shoot out in the hallway, on the other side of the wall Gene Abel and Ann Job are methodically dressing the interior of Lisa's apartment. There's no adequate word for it other than "fabulous." Pink carpet, textured grey moldings, silver and glass coffee table, a rich red leather sofa indisputably reminiscent of Sam's Studebaker, a spectacular octagonal wall mirror of chaste silver, several huge crystals displayed on custom-made pedestals and lit from below, and a broad picture window with what will be a breathtaking view of the city.

It turns out that Steve was right. Ve Neill wins the Oscar for *Beetlejuice*, sharing the award with Steve LaPorte and Robert Short.

Steve is miffed. "Rick Baker deserved to win," he complains, "not her for just putting white stuff on people's faces!"

In the next part of the scene, Lisa steps off the elevator into the hall and spies Sam rummaging through his pockets. Sam seems a bit cloying when he asks where she's been, but she deflects his concern. She turns suddenly serious when she tells Sam that the school doctor has suffered a bizarre demise: burned to death in a shower stall with the water running.

The camera is set on the tripod at the midpoint of the hallway. Cynthia enters from the elevator and the camera pans with her as she crosses to her apartment door. It's another seemingly straightforward shot that suffers a series of setbacks, chiefly from Cynthia's performance.

She seems slightly scattered, stopping in the middle of one rehearsal with the odd justification, "Ulp, I'm sorry! I forgot to talk loud."

Huh? She also doesn't seem to have a handle on her lines, flubbing them time after time during rehearsal and while the cameras roll.

Since the camera is stationary, Cameron can get in there with the boom mike, but the complex lighting plot in the long corridor make shadows an abiding concern.

When Paul points out a boom shadow on the wall, Cameron defers to Levie: "Well, Levie doesn't see it. If he doesn't see it, he doesn't see it."

"I can see *that*!" is Levie's curt response.

In the background, to the tune of Cat Stevens' "Moon Shadow," I can hear Craig singing, "I'm being followed by a boom shadow, boom shadow, boom shadow..."

The scene is a window into Sam and Lisa's relationship, and Tobe spends a lot of time in conversation with Brad and Cynthia to get the rhythms right. Cynthia's giddy mood evaporates quickly. At one point, Tobe

walks away from her in mid-sentence, leaving her behind with many still unanswered questions. It's almost as if he is deliberately upsetting her for the sake of the scene.

I've been checking the television set in the production office for periodic updates on the Oscars. Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* was just announced as the Best Picture winner, which I consider a huge disappointment. I was pulling for *Mississippi Burning*, Alan Parker's searing film about the murder of three civil rights activists in 1964. Not only is it a great film, but our very own Brad Dourif plays a featured role as a smarmy, racist deputy sheriff alongside Gene Hackman and Frances McDormand, both of whom were nominated.

On the plus side, Peter Biziou, the film's director of photography, won the award for Best Cinematography, a fact I'm eager to pass on to Brad.

First assistant cameraman Dana Gonzales is definitely getting a workout today. Because of the placement of the camera in the constricting hallway, it's necessary for him to slink beneath the lens as it pans, requiring an acrobat's agility to do so.

I can't help but notice that Tobe's ensemble for the day, sky-blue T-shirt, aquamarine button-up, and grey Dockers, is perfectly color coordinated to the set. Is it possible that this is intentional, or is it merely coincidence? It may not be such a far-fetched observation, considering Tobe's clear command of color, as evinced by its careful use in the film. For example, in this scene Lisa enters carrying a bright yellow shopping bag, which cries out like an alarm amid all the cool pastel tones.

In his close-up, when Cynthia reveals the mysterious circumstances surrounding Dr. Simpson's death, the perplexed expression on Brad's face and his tepid response of "Oh, no." are both priceless.

Brad is released for the night. As he's leaving the set, it occurs to me what a nightmare the birthmark on his hand must pose for continuity. One day it's the size of a nickel, the next it's inflated to cover the back of his hand. Just keeping track of it must be a full-time job on its own.

The next setup is exceedingly more complicated. The scene takes place late in the film. Lisa has barely managed to extricate herself from a menacing encounter with Marsh. As she tries to escape the building, the power surges unaccountably, causing the hallway lights to oscillate violently and rendering the elevator inaccessible.

Levie rehearses the camera move with Cynthia's stand-in Leslie while David coordinates the lighting with his electrical team. Molly and Ann Marie operate the breakers that control the lights. The trick is to alternate the flashes in a seemingly random fashion.

David is not pleased with the initial attempts. "We can't have them all going on and off at the same time!" he says adamantly. "We can't have it completely dark in here!"

Paul freaks out when he thinks that Craig and Cameron have wrapped out early, but it turns out that they've just moved the sound cart to another part of the stage.

The camera move is basically a reverse of Brad's entrance to the scene, backing away from the hall and into the elevator, only now the crew has to squeeze back through the slender doorway. What with all the construction that's going on around us, Todd is justifiably concerned about the possibility of nails or screws on the floor during the dolly move. Monty gives the path a quick sweep for good measure.

Many takes are required to get all the timing right, and then only by happy accident. But Cynthia is finally on top of her game. With each take she becomes more fearful and abstracted. Her confusion and terror are palpable, the chaos around her a manifestation of Lisa's frenzied mind.

Frank is charged with rapidly sliding the elevator door open and closed as if its electrical circuits have shorted out, making a horrible noise like sandpaper on stone.

At the end of one of the last takes, Todd cracks, "Frank, it sounds like you're trying to get Sanford's wallet open over there!"

At about 4:00 am, after we wrap, Tobe lounges on the Studebaker couch. He admits to being overwhelmed by the opulence of Lisa's apartment when he first sees it fully dressed. Consequently, he decides to reveal it to the cameras only little by little. As her guilt and complicity in Sam's crisis become more apparent, so too will the unlikely splendor of her surroundings.

Thursday, March 30, 1989 - Day 23

Lisa's apartment is indeed spectacular. It's spacious and pristine, with retro-style furnishings of leather and glass and iron, glass brick inlays, light fixtures with an atomic motif, gemstones large and small, modernist neon

accessories, and a huge cracked-glass crystal ball as the centerpiece of the room. With a fire burning in the fireplace and all the lights blazing, it's an urban dream palace.

The neon telephone is already the subject of controversy. After Sam's eye has blown out during his call to Lisa from the pay phone, he momentarily acquires the inscrutable ability to "see" through the telephone. Lisa dismisses his enigmatic descriptions of the objects in her apartment as mere rambling until a glaring eyeball inexplicably appears in the telephone receiver. Visual effects supervisor Steve Brooks reasonably assumed that the phone would be of the standard black plastic type, and has designed his "holographic eye" effect accordingly. Now it's back to the drawing board.

On the drive in today, Eric and I listen to a mix tape I've assembled made up of a multitude of fire-themed songs. From Arthur Brown's classic "Fire" to Linda Ronstadt's version of "My Old Flame" to Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House," the music energizes us and puts us in the right frame of mind.

When we arrive to the stage at about 5:00 pm they are still setting up for the first shot. Cynthia looks around the set, familiarizing herself with Lisa's apartment. Without her shoulder wrap, her stunning décolletage is on proud display.

Brad is fascinated by the giant quartz crystals decorating the room. He runs his hand meditatively over the jagged textures of the largest and most impressive.

At first blush, the room appears comfortably large. But when it is packed with camera equipment and crew, grips, electricians, lights, a script supervisor, two actors, and a director, it seems to be much, much smaller.

Tobe explains to Cynthia his concept of the sequence, how the space will be shown only incrementally as it plays out. He tells her, "We won't see the place, really," meaning the whole apartment, "until you're on your way to the emergency room."

The scene is a continuation of last night's hallway sequence. Lisa enters her apartment and Sam steps in after her. He conjectures that Dr. Simpson's untimely death is the result of spontaneous combustion, the phenomenon mentioned on Dr. Persons' radio broadcast. In attempting to console him, Lisa notices his bandaged finger.

When asked what happened, Sam's blunt response is, "It burned."

This exchange is played in the entryway to the apartment. On the other side of the door, the hallway is just a fading memory.

Rehearsals are lighthearted. Brad is once again in an impetuous mood. He startles Cynthia with a loud and unexpected “OW!” when she touches his finger.

As they enter on the first take, the room lights come up before Cynthia even touches the switch. Paul was too quick on the draw with his cue.

“Better late than early, guys!” says Tobe.

“That was me!” admits Paul, “I was late the first time and I was overcompensating.”

Whenever Brad says the line, “It burned,” a trace of his native West Virginia accent sneaks through.

For some reason, we have a guest dolly grip today, a “grip du jour.” Todd is here, so I’m not sure I understand the need. Not to mention the fact that so far, the camera hasn’t moved a fraction of an inch.

Todd, by the way, is wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt that wouldn’t be out of place on “loud shirt” day. It looks as if a rainbow exploded all over his chest.

Since there are so many people coming and going, the apartment’s sliding glass doors are marked with strips of bright orange tape to prevent anyone from inadvertently walking into them.

The next shot takes up later in the scene.

Sam attempts to describe for Lisa his visions while staring into his fireplace and the dissociation of losing himself in the flames. “It’s like, I *am* fire! I’m *on* fire, but I’m not!”

Lisa’s new-age flakiness leads her to confidently dismiss his trance state as an “out-of-body experience.” She seems anxious to avoid the discussion altogether.

As they reset lights for the new angle, David softly sings to himself, “Don’t worry, be happy!” while Brad’s lighting double Adriano unwittingly tries to smell the artificial daffodils.

From the camera’s low POV, the large crystal ball looms in the foreground like a setting sun. As Cynthia gets up from the sofa to give Brad a hug, the camera performs a graceful maneuver, booming up, dollying right, and panning left simultaneously, in the process revealing a new corner of the apartment. Cynthia’s performance is sweet and sincere, with only a hint of manipulation.

In the context of subsequent events, Lisa's gleeful "I've got a surprise for you!" is a colossal understatement.

Today's call sheet lists an extremely intricate effects shot of Sam's arm sprouting a volcano of flame, but Steve Brooks is rightly skeptical that it's going to happen. He sums up the sometimes-tedious process of making a film with this mantra: "And then they waited for the lights, and then they waited for the grips, and then they waited for the art department, and then they waited on camera, and then they waited on Tobe, and then, finally, at four o'clock in the morning, they waited on *effects!*"

Eric's wife Julie and his cousin Warren drop by for a visit. Unfortunately, the space is so tight on the set that there is little to see, and so they don't stay long.

Although Nancy endures a lot of teasing, her job as script supervisor is not only incredibly detail oriented, but also absolutely essential to the process. She records every camera angle, lens size, f-stop, lighting component, prop placement, wardrobe change, etc. Without her efforts, the exposed footage would be nothing but a tangled mess waiting to be unraveled. I think that her being fondly taunted by the crew is somewhat akin to naughty boys pulling on the pigtails of the smartest little girl in school.

Some of the jargon that the crew uses is beyond my ken. When I hear David tell his best boy Johnny, "Gimme an inky with a snoot!" I'm totally lost.

In preparing for Brad's close up, the guys from the art department struggle to remove a large leather recliner through the sliding door to provide room to accommodate the camera. They lift and twist it every which way to find the right angle, with Craig pitching in to assist. There is one nerve-wracking moment when it gets lodged in the doorway, but thankfully it's extricated easily and everyone involved can take a breath.

The shot never comes off, however, as Tobe seems somehow dissatisfied. We wrap atypically early, at about 4:00 am.

In the workshop area of the stage, there is a primitive mock-up of a proposed visual effects technique. A foam core cutout of the Studebaker's silhouette is mounted in front of a long glass panel. A scrolling cityscape panorama (created using the photographs that Eric took on the streets of Altadena several weeks ago) lies on the workbench between them. A white plastic spoon whimsically stands in for Sam. In theory, when the spool's

crank is turned, the image of the city passing by is reflected in the glass, creating the illusion that the vehicle is travelling on the road when it is in reality standing stock still.

Eric and I decide to test the effect on videotape. Before we do, I draw a face on the spoon, just for shits and giggles. I turn the crank and the effect works as it's meant to, but the lighting is all wrong and the result is disappointing.

As Eric demurely puts it, "I can't see a fucking thing!"

Friday, March 31, 1989 - Day 24

I walk into the stage at about 5:00 pm to find the set apparently abandoned. The word is that Tobe is upstairs meeting with the producers in order to partially rework the scene they started shooting yesterday. So, nothing to do but wait.

Richard McGuire and his team are working on various aspects of the miniature city that will be visible outside Lisa's window. He's constructed three telephone poles of diminishing size using cardboard shipping tubes, 2x4s, and discarded scraps of wood. They'll be placed in a row quite near to one another, but because of their variant sizes, will appear to fade off into the distance. In addition, there are die-cut etchings of rooftops and trees that span beyond the length of the set.

Tony Hooper has roped off a wider area for his new workspace. He's been commissioned and budgeted to build an articulated man entirely out of aluminum (armature, cables, servomechanisms) that won't be consumed by flames when it's set on fire. He's also been provided with a female assistant by the name of Alex to help with various odd jobs and cleanup. It's compelling to watch Tony work. He's completely intuitive, rarely even referring to his own schematic drawings. He's posted a tremendous sign reading, "Do not move or touch *ANYTHING!*" with a skull and crossbones as a warning to interlopers.

Nearly five hours have passed, and they still haven't exposed a foot of film.

Amateur photographer Ann Marie catches me as I write in my journal and wants to take a portrait of me at work. She tells me to act naturally, which of course makes me immediately self-conscious. But the light's no good, so she brings over a C-Stand with a tweenie (a smallish movie light)

to illuminate the area. Now, there's no film in the camera. Yeesh! Get it together, girl!

Eventually, professional photographer Eric ends up snapping the shot, raving, "You're gonna dig this so much, dude!"

Finally, they're ready to roll. Sam's suspicions of Lisa's motives originate in this scene. When he can't seem to let go of his preoccupation with the unexplained deaths of Dr. Simpson and Amy Whittaker, Lisa turns away, attempting to distract him by switching on Dr. Person's radio program.

Sam's attention is drawn to an extravagant floral arrangement on the glass-top dining table. He reads the gift card and is taken aback to find that it is inscribed to Lisa from his mentor and ex-grandfather-in-law, Lewis Olander. "I didn't know that you knew Lew," he utters apprehensively.

The shot begins with a kiss. Cynthia then leaves Brad on the couch as she goes to gather up Sam's birthday presents. Brad glances at the burning fireplace, but quickly catches himself and turns away, tormented by the memory of his recent hallucinatory experience. Brad is very still, but his attenuated performance makes Sam's deep discomfort crystal clear.

As the scene continues, Lisa insists that Sam speak to Dr. Persons, convinced that the radio psychic can put his mind at ease. She practically thrusts the phone into his reluctant hand. The prop phone is a clear acrylic Slimline model that exudes hot-pink neon light. When Brad holds it to his ear, he glows as if irradiated. The shot ends with Brad stepping into a huge close-up, awash in luminous pink.

In the first take, the phone cord pops from the wall socket and the neon light is extinguished. The prop department scrambles to get a longer cord.

They shoot a stationary single on Cynthia removing birthday gifts from her bag and eyeing Brad with trepidation. Until now, Lisa's mendacity has never been so obvious.

From his sound cart's perch on the porch of the apartment, Craig has been quietly bad-mouthing Cynthia's performance all evening. With Craig, it's next to impossible to know whether he's kidding or not. My own opinion is that Cynthia is quite good, so I can only conclude that he's just being a prick.

The next very long shot lasts for the duration of Sam's radio call-in, designed to mirror a slow push-in on Joe Mays as Dr. Persons shot at the radio station set weeks ago. The grips have laid plywood boards the length

of the apartment hallway for a smooth, slow roll toward Brad as he gesticulates on the phone. Firsts AC Dana has a particularly difficult job in keeping Brad in steady focus as the camera creeps down the hall.

Sam's dialogue makes him come off like kind of a crank. With Nancy reading his lines off camera, Dr. Persons fares no better, begging the question of whether he's a gifted medium or a shady con man.

Brad's performance borders on the comic. As Sam's repressed memories come to the fore, he blisses out on thoughts of his mother's lullaby and, when prompted by Persons, surprises himself by unconsciously blurting out his real name, "David Bell."

After a couple of takes, Tobe asks Brad if he could play the scene without Nancy's interjections. Always amicable, Brad willingly agrees and the scene suddenly comes alive.

Unfortunately (or, depending on your point of view, fortunately), at the end of the take, Brad inadvertently wraps everybody for the night by accidentally dropping the phone to the floor, breaking the neon tubing. Though mortified, he receives a hearty, grateful cheer from the shagged-out crew.

Thanks to Brad's fortuitous clumsiness, we wrap at 3:00 am, about an hour earlier than anticipated.

Saturday, April 1, 1989

4:00 pm. Today is dedicated exclusively to the construction of a forced-perspective miniature of the little town of Trinidad Beach, with the nuclear power plant's gleaming cooling towers the center of focus. Gene Abel, Richard McGuire, the entire art department, and all the grips and electrics work together to assemble the components like piecing together a massive diorama.

Three separate silhouetted cityscapes, an array of flashing red and white lights, and a scale model of the power plant are among the components to be used in bringing the city to life. The stage is abuzz with the whine of power tools and the hum of conversation. The energy level is high, and everyone is ready and able to pitch in with whatever task needs doing.

I've come to appreciate that the grips are, among many other things, talented engineers. They're called upon to solve some of the most intractable problems imaginable, and to do it with speed and dexterity.

Monty Spillers in particular is a tireless worker and endlessly creative in resolving technical problems, in addition to which I've never heard him utter a cross word or the smallest complaint.^[24]

Since it's April Fool's Day, Eric decides to pull a prank on the folks hanging around in the office. He attaches a bit of fishing line to a dollar bill, crumples it up, and tosses it on the floor. Nearly ten minutes pass as people come and go, all failing to notice the bill and often stepping right over it.

Finally, Nancy crosses the floor, sees the dollar and exclaims, "Ah, *money!*"

As she bends down to pick it up, Eric tugs on the line, snatching it from her grasp and robbing her of both her booty and her dignity. As a consolation, he lets her keep the dollar.

The bathroom in Lisa's apartment is coming together nicely. The design scheme is the same as Lisa's living room, but the colors are predominantly soft shades of green. The bathtub is jade-green porcelain and the room's mosaic tiles echo the walls in Marsh's examination room. The set figures prominently in an important effects scene scheduled early next week, so despite the progress that's been made, there's still much to be done and little time in which to do it.

Tobe has come down to the stage floor to check on the progress of the project.

After taking it all in, he calls the department heads together for a meeting. Very diplomatically, he explains that he's not satisfied with the work so far. It's simply not what he visualizes. He wants more of a valley view, so most of the foreground buildings will have to go. And he wants roads leading directly up to the power plant.

It looks like they're going to have to rethink their approach from the ground up.

Time is short, though. The workday ends at 10:00 pm.

WEEK SIX

POWER FAILURE

Monday, April 3, 1989 - Day 25

“You *idiot!*”

These are the first words I hear as I walk onto the stage at 10:00 am. On the apartment set, they’re shooting Cynthia’s reaction shot to Brad’s explosive rage on the telephone. On the table behind her, Sam’s festive birthday cake bursts into flames when his unbridled temper skyrockets.

Tobe prods Cynthia during the take: “Step back, step back, step back... and look at him, *boom!*”

The panorama of Trinidad Beach has been transformed, seemingly overnight. It is infinitely improved, more convincing and, perhaps more importantly, also more stylistically appealing. The cooling towers are lit with tiny spotlights of blue. The city spreads out below the balcony like a sheer blanket of twinkling stars.

Today they’re scheduled to shoot Sam’s forearm eruption. The effect is Steve Neill’s responsibility. He shows me his impressive preliminary video test, which basically consists of a swelling bladder filled with fake blood and scored to burst open at a predetermined point. It’s a variation of a technique pioneered by legendary special effects wizard Dick Smith for David Cronenberg’s body-horror film *Shivers*, but more widely seen years later in Ken Russell’s *Altered States*.

The camera is turned around for Brad’s close-up. Since the city miniature is not quite complete, Levie expresses concern about its reflection in the mirror over the phone but receives assurances that it won’t “read” on film.

Scenes 48–50: likely a result of the emotions stirred up by his phone call to Dr. Persons, Sam is suddenly wracked with grueling pain as his

birthmark uncomprehendingly expands to twice its original size. Struggling against the pain and desperate to reconnect to the radio show, he frantically redials the phone. The call is answered by the hapless radio technician destined to become the victim of Sam's fiery wrath.

It's a very tight shot of Brad's face, hot pink in the light of the phone. Brad holds his energy in reserve during rehearsals, waiting to unleash his rage when the camera rolls. He's also come up with the idea to bury his face in Cynthia's neck when she runs to his aid, which Tobe instantly embraces.

Just before they roll on the first take, Tobe prompts Brad, "Furious dialing!"

There is no visual effect other than a small puff of smoke to depict Sam's expanding birthmark. Instead, it will be achieved through the use of skillful editing, so Brad has to really "sell" the discomfort. He grimaces horribly, his face gnarled into a twisted mask of pain, his disbelieving eyes like ice-blue marbles.

While Brad goes upstairs to have his prosthetics applied, Tobe has Levie shoot a quick pick-up of Sam's bandaged finger, with Paul's hand as a stand-in. The shot is history in a matter of minutes.

Work continues on the vast cityscape. Craig contributes his electrical knowledge by wiring tiny pin lights onto the tops of the nuclear towers. The cutout rooftops have been replaced in the foreground with three-dimensional model buildings with lighted rectangular windows. It's all in the details.

Earlier today, on the way to the set, Sean raced past us on the highway at a blistering speed. He now explains that he had with him a replacement for the broken neon phone, and that filming couldn't proceed without it.

I have no idea what incites it, but David completely flips out. It must be just pent-up frustration, because he's normally levelheaded and fun to be around. Thanks to the grumbling from some of the grips (who I'm beginning to think should more accurately be referred to as "gripes"), we break for lunch at 3:00 pm, right on schedule.

After we return, it takes more than an hour to prepare for the next setup. Because of the nature of the special effects, they may have only one take to get the shot, so both "A" and "B" cameras are working. The lighting plot is very involved, and the set is littered with flags and filters and Kliegs, making Brad's path to his on camera position a virtual obstacle course.

Brad's arm is rigged with the inflatable bladder, encased in latex, and painted in flesh-colored makeup. It's anybody's guess how this will exacerbate his already irritated skin, but Brad seems unconcerned about any potential negative consequences. He's intensely focused on the task at hand.

Steve Neill kneels at Brad's feet with an air compressor hooked up to a tube running up Brad's shirt, down his sleeve and into the bladder. Considering his past experiences with unreliable technology, Tobe inquires whether Steve's device isn't "a bit dodgy." Steve assures him that the machine has a failsafe switch that will automatically shut it down before it clogs or backs up, giving Tobe one less thing to worry about.

As the shot gets closer, the stage grows quieter. Tobe calls for a rehearsal. Brad speaks his lines without emotion, saving his stamina for the real deal.

Steve's bladder inflates only slightly, compelling Tobe to observe, "I didn't see much swell, man."

"Well, I don't want that sucker to blow too soon!" counters Steve.

Always mindful of the time, Paul insists, "We have to go right away, people!"

When the cameras roll, Brad explosively vents his bottled-up rage, spontaneously changing "idiot" to "*fucking* idiot!" His arm swells like a speedily metastasizing tumor and a tiny trickle of blood dribbles out.

"*Cut!* Um, I don't think we're communicating," Tobe avers.

"Oh, no," says Steve.

Take two is cut short when Brad spies Eric in his eye line, causing him to lose his concentration. Before they can move on to the next take, a walkie-talkie crackles with the voice of an anonymous woman having a one-sided conversation.

"Radios off!" Paul commands.

Take three is the money shot.

Paul exhorts the crew, "Ready? Ready? Everybody stand real still now!"

Tobe hisses, "Lots of anger! Action!"

As the flashbulbs go off, Brad winces and roars, "Aaargh!" His forearm inflates to the size of a baseball, pops like a pustule, and cascades of blood spurt from the gaping wound.

"*Cut!*"

The effect works well, but I think that Steve's test video was rather better.

As soon as he's released, Brad makes a beeline to the makeup room and removes the appliances on his own. Before you know it, he's out of his wardrobe and into his street clothes.

The crew resets for the first shot featuring the now-complete model city. It's a splendid view through the window, with the power plant spilling hazy blue light into the night sky and a low mountain range far off in the distance. Power lines strung on utility poles disappear into the darkness. The diffusion screen hangs between the balcony and the model, replicating the shimmering flicker of gaslight across the wide expanse of the valley. Plentiful smoke creates the illusion of low clouds and fog. A tiny pin light on a wire represents a passing airplane.

When the miniature is fully lit and operational, Levie is impressed. "Yeah, it looks like Califor-nyay!"

In this scene, Lisa receives a frantic phone call from Sam. She tries to calm him, but his agitation steadily increases, culminating in a ghostly flaming hand lunging impossibly from the phone and clawing at her throat.

Focused on the distant nuclear plant, the camera then descends behind the orange-lighted crystal ball, as if an enormous sun were rising into the frame. Lisa's blue neon extension phone sits on the glass coffee table beside it. The camera pans left as Cynthia enters the shot to answer the ringing phone. The conversation grows heated and the camera retreats as Cynthia rises and goes to the mirror, rushing finally into a close-up when Lisa's lies are exposed.

Even though he's wrapped for the night, Brad graciously stays behind to play the scene with Cynthia off camera. Ironically, she is only a few short steps away from where she sat last week to play the same scene off camera with Brad.

Wardrobe has provided Dana with a formal black jacket to prevent the camera from catching his reflection the window glass.

After a perfunctory rehearsal, Tobe wants to forge ahead, with one last instruction for the scenic crew: "You can stop spritzing...when the actors start talking, we don't need fog anymore!"

It's a long, emotional scene, and playing it from beginning to end without a cut definitely takes its toll on Cynthia, just as it had on Brad.

However, she has never seemed more focused. At the end of the first take, she is visibly shaken.

On the second take, Cynthia really hits her stride. She begins at the pitch on which she ended the previous take.

By the end of the third take, she is deeply affected, shedding real tears and trembling with nervous tension. When they cut, there is spontaneous applause from the crew, something that almost never happens for an actor's performance.

In a generous show of support, Brad makes a point of catching her eye, giving her a big thumbs-up and proclaiming her acting "killer!" To be sure, Brad's thrilling off camera work gave her a lot to play off, but all the credit belongs to her.

The next sequence features one of the more esoteric conceits in the screenplay: Sam "sees" into Lisa's apartment via the electrical impulses travelling through the phone lines. As his speech gets more and more incoherent, Lisa holds the phone away from her ear, not wanting to hear his ravings.

Sam is enraptured with his newfound psychic ability and wonderingly describes with what he sees: "I see your floor! I see *you* in the mirror! It's like I'm in your head, seeing through your eyes!" When an agonized Lisa hugs the phone to her bosom, he rhapsodizes, "I see purple clouds!"

Standing in front of the window, waiting for the cameras to roll, Cynthia is a bit overwhelmed by the intricacy of the scene's timing, having to hold the phone at a particular angle to coincide with Brad's lines. Brad suggests that he speak his lines slowly, allowing her to match her action to his dialogue, which will be properly synched up in postproduction anyway. They talk it through together and it both works well and eases Cynthia's anxiety.

Tobe loves it too. "That's good, I mean, that's *great*!"

Brad's turning out to be something of a mentor to Cynthia.

Last minute preparations for the shot are well under way. Brian replaces a faulty film magazine on the camera. Steve Brooks, who has to practically lay face down on the floor to avoid being seen in the mirror, practices puffing clouds of smoke in concert with a blowing wind machine. Guy checks the flashbulbs to make sure they're primed and ready to fire.

And Brad confers with Tobe on the timing of his lines: "So, after the flashes, how long before I start...gabbin' my jaw?"

Although Cynthia's performance is spot-on and the flashbulbs go off on cue and the smoke is perfect, the first take is no good. The fan is ratcheted up too high.

"Y'know, something was *very* wrong with that! That thing" says Tobe, referring to Cynthia's magenta shoulder wrap, "blew up around her neck!" rendering the shot unusable.

The second take is technically smoother, but in my opinion, Cynthia is more lackluster than in the first. Before cutting, Tobe talks her through some of her actions again, apparently feeling that earlier in the take he hadn't gotten what he needed.

We break for second meal somewhere around 9:00 pm.

Eric and I go over to check the progress on Tony's aluminum automaton. His work is mind-blowing. The mechanics are ingenious and the flexibility of motion remarkable. I can't begin to get my head around it, but it looks to me like the precision movement of a Swiss clock.

Todd and the grips wolf down their burgers. "Let's get this over with, Paul!" crows Todd, "What else do we have to do?"

"Just one more scene with her alone—" Paul starts to say, but Todd interrupts, "One more *scene*?!"

It turns out that although the phone being used for the "eye gag" is encased in acrylic and neon-lit, the handset is of the conventional black vinyl type, so Steve Brooks has not in fact had to rethink his concept of the effect. It's been rigged to emit smoke from the transmitter and a hologram of an unblinking eye has been inlaid into the receiver.

The next sequence begins in the aftermath of the last shot. Sam is disintegrating, emotionally and physically, his identity being shattered and scattered to the winds. Lisa is lost, unable to make sense of what's happening and ill-equipped to deal with the ramifications.

Cynthia has no dialogue, but she so movingly conveys Lisa's heartbreaking fear and helpless sadness that it's uncomfortable to watch. Though not on camera, Brad's performance is a miracle of ecstasy and anguish, of seething viciousness and terrifying pain. His thunderous voice causes the set walls to shake. When the scene ends, the crew awards them both with a rousing ovation.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" is Tobe's estimation.

Sam has a lot of extra lines that don't appear in my copy of the script, mainly having to do with the character of Jennifer Strikes, the young

student who seems unhealthily obsessed with him. Sam envisions her in unimaginable torment, devoured by flames and crumbling to dust.

The last shot of the night is a close-up on Cynthia holding the smoldering phone with the holographic eye. The earpiece has been coated in a black waxy substance to simulate melted plastic. Tobe wants to be sure that the smoke will flow through the melted wax, so Monty steps up with a nail and pokes holes into it to clear a passage.

“That’s it,” urges Tobe, “ream that sumbitch out there!”

When they roll, smoke pours from the transmitter in thick gusts while thin tendrils of gray vapor seep languidly from the receiver.

Sadly, Friday was Kat’s last day on the show. She had a prior agreement to start work on another film, and so we are all the poorer for it. She’s a terrific lady, and will be sorely missed.

We wrap late, close to midnight. Dailies are screened afterwards—all the stuff from the hallway outside Lisa’s apartment.

The images are crisp and beautiful. David’s lighting is exemplary, to my eye evocative of classic film noir. When Cynthia flees through the hallway with the lights pulsating madly and the camera chasing after her, it’s fucking scary.

And Marc’s cameo gets a big laugh.

Tuesday, April 4, 1989 - Day 26

Let’s start the day with a limerick.

There once was a fellow named Kramer,
An atomic hotheaded inflamer,
Lisa quenched his desire,
He consumed her in fire,
Looking back on it, can anyone blame her?

After a hectic morning running errands, Eric and I arrive to the set at 12:30 pm, about 2½ hours after crew call. It’s no matter, though, as they’re just getting ready to roll on the day’s first take as we walk in. I notice immediately that Tobe is wearing on his shirt the button featuring the symbol for nuclear power that I’ve been handing out to select members of the crew.

At this point in the script, Sam has already combusted into a fiery heap of ashes at Olander's mansion. Lisa is in shock, nurturing her hand, scalded from the heat of the melting phone. The radio reports on Olander's baffling death while her telephone, somehow still functional, rings and rings. Lisa knows that it's Sam calling but is understandably reticent to answer.

Sam's disembodied voice drifts from the radio. "*Lisa*, why don't you answer the phone?"

The shot begins tight on the power plant in the distance. It's a testament to the artistry of the model makers that it holds up so well to such close scrutiny. The camera dollies back and pans over to Cynthia, hand freshly bandaged, sitting pensively on the edge of the black leather chair.

Sitting to the side on an upended apple box, Brad again performs his lines for Cynthia's benefit.

The first take is aborted when the camera rolls out, running out of film. Motion picture film is so expensive that most budget-conscious productions use every available foot in order to reduce waste.

Cynthia is having trouble with some aspect of the scene, but Tobe has no time for conversation, snapping, "Well, we'll just blow it off, then!" and away he goes.

Out in the middle of the miniature town, Frank makes small adjustments to the model power plant, towering over the tiny community like Godzilla on a rampage.

The second take is a keeper, and they can now move on to the serious business of preparing for the next very important and equally complicated setup, what has been dubbed by certain members of the crew as "*the Poltergeist* shot." In that film, as Jobeth Williams runs down the hallway, desperate to save her children from being ingested by a spectral vortex, the hall elongates beyond all reason, holding her screaming offspring more hopelessly out of reach the faster she runs. The upcoming shot features a similar slow, protracted creep down a long, narrow hallway.

While the crew prepares, Unit publicist Nan Herst conducts a short interview (for the film's press kit) with Brad in his trailer. In opposition to his on camera persona, Brad is very reserved during the interview, almost shy.

When asked his thoughts on working with Tobe Hooper, he responds, "Well, I like working with Tobe a lot! It's really exciting working with somebody as original as he is." On the extent of his preparation for the role,

he offers, “I got the part about ten days before we started shooting, so, uh, *I learned my lines*. That’s about all I had time for. I’ve got a *lot* of lines, so...”

He’s very complimentary to Cynthia, declaring her “just as good as anybody I’ve ever worked with,” and referring to her as “a really remarkable actress.”

The interview closes with a question about the prospects for the finished film, to which Brad replies, “It’s one of those things where, um, we’ll see when it’s cut together. But I’m gonna go with [Tobe’s] instincts.”

Steve Neill has created a latex replica of Brad’s arm, complete with yawning wound and articulated fingers. A hose runs from a propane tank up through it with the nozzle situated at the opening to the wound. In the shot, actual jets of flame will shoot from the arm as Brad howls in agony.

Scene 54: at the end of the hallway, Sam holds his ulcerating arm away from his body as Lisa flutters behind him in a panic, filling the bathtub with water to quell the blaze. As is to be expected, there are a lot of rehearsals, for the camera, for the actors, and for the lighting and special effects.

Brad has a particularly tough job convincingly manipulating the prosthetic arm while simultaneously gurgling and writhing in pain. He has to bend his body like a contortionist to make the effect work.

When Brad thinks that he’s positioned himself correctly, he calls out, “How’s that, Boss?”

“That looks pretty good!” Tobe has to admit.

“Looks like the real McCoy!” adds Levie, “How do *you* feel about it?”

“I *love* it, man!” Brad says effusively, “I fucking *love* this shit!”

I see Jon Cypher on his way up to wardrobe and makeup. He’s here to shoot a scene later tonight in which Marsh menaces Lisa.

When all the kinks are finally ironed out, they’re ready to roll. Since the shot is wide and the carpet is visible, there are no plywood boards on the floor. The dolly rolls right over the runner.

Kerry Mendenhall spritzes Brad, causing ringlets of sweat to drip from his hair, while at the same time Janet from wardrobe moistens his clothing.

Squeezed into a corner behind the bathroom door to operate the arm, Steve Neill grumbles, “Tobe always sticks me in little holes!”

A watertight lighting unit is submerged in the tub to provide reflective light when Brad plunges his arm beneath the water’s surface.

They get the shot in one nearly perfect take. The camera rolls smoothly down the hall. The artificial arm flexes and the fingers contract as fire spews out of the hideous, gaping rupture. Brad cringes from the flames as they nibble at his chin. As Cynthia drags him screaming to the bathtub, Tobe calls out, “Look into the tub, Brad! *Cut!*”

In the very small confines of the bathroom set, Tobe and Levie meet to work out the logistics of the next shot, in which Sam catches his reflection in the mirror, the fire persisting even after being dunked in the tub. It’s a bit of a puzzle, as there are mirrors all around reflecting back on each other at differing angles.

Tobe and Levie take turns manipulating the artificial arm to find the ideal composition. Steve Brooks suggests that they bring Brad onto the set for his input, but before he arrives, Tobe announces, “I just saw the shot!” and demonstrates the action by rearing back and letting loose with a hilarious “Aiieee!”

Steve pipes up, “That’s a very good performance, there!”

Tobe laughs and nods. “Well, thank you!”

With Brad on the set, it’s still a matter of trial and error to establish the proper placement of the camera and Brad’s position relative to the mirrors. However, when they finally find the “sweet spot,” the multiple reflections seem to be a visual manifestation of Sam’s fragmented identity.

As meticulous and time-consuming as the preparation is, the shot itself comes off swiftly, ending on Brad’s uncomprehending gaze as the flames recede. “And I’m *alive?*” he mutters in disbelief.

My sketchbook has been making the rounds of the crew, yielding some interesting contributions. Bill Miller-Jones filled a page with a perplexing diagram detailing the duality of mankind’s consciousness: pleasure/pain, approval/rejection, that sort of thing. Kerry Mendenhall, using makeup as her medium (blush, lipstick, mascara), has drawn a lovely self-portrait which she has undersigned, “This is not a self-portrait.” I watch as Richard McGuire executes a wonderful two-handed drawing of a werewolf, using both hands simultaneously.

They’ve removed the bathroom wall from behind the tub for the next two-camera setup, separate shots respectively favoring Brad and Cynthia; Sam lapses into catatonia as his arm burns underwater and Lisa backs away petrified, after her fruitless efforts to rouse him have failed.

Tobe wants a reflective material below the water to bounce light into Brad's eyes. When David says, "Who said to break a mirror in the bottom, 'cause that's a great idea!" Tobe is having none of it: "No, no, no, don't break no damn mirrors! That's bad, *bad!*"

As is often the case, space is tight. Tobe and 2nd AC Brian literally rub elbows as they kneel close together in front of the tub.

"Good thing we like each other, huh?" jokes Brian.

When they roll, Brad is superb, his eyes frozen in a thousand-yard stare. Shimmering amber light plays across his face as the water boils and churns in the tub. Cynthia goes up on her lines, and Tobe has to prompt her. However, her performance is excellent, especially her hysterical cries of "The water, it's like fuel! It's making the fire *worse!*"

They shoot two equally good takes, but Brad has a preference. He thinks that his trance is better in the first take, but that the beginning of the scene was better in the second. Tobe decides to print them both and sort it out in the editing room.

Jon Cypher is in Lisa's living room, decked out in his leather gloves and trench coat, high collar turned up vampire-like, ready to inhabit the ruthless Dr. John Marsh again.

In this scene, while lost in thought and staring out into the night, Lisa witnesses a bolt of lightning strike the towers of the nuclear power plant. Her eyes widen as voltaic strands of St. Elmo's fire advance along the power lines towards her, terminating in a concussive blast that knocks her off her feet. As she struggles to regain her composure, Marsh stealthily enters her apartment and stabs her with a syringe of phosphorous fluid.

Prop men Bill Roberts and Frank Bertolino fill a large syringe with the bright, lime-colored liquid from a Cyalume glow stick, the kind of thing you're likely to find in an emergency kit or at a rock concert.

During a rehearsal, the syringe leaks onto Cypher's glove and drips onto the rug. Fearing a permanent stain, I rush to the rescue with a roll of paper towels to wipe off Jon's glove while Frank mops up spots from the carpet. Luckily, there was no need to panic. It comes off easily.

The dolly is set on plywood planks leading from the balcony into the apartment. The air mortar sits beside it, primed to blow a cloud of dust at Cynthia. At Tobe's call of "Action!" the blast knocks her back into a chair, the camera rushes forward and a standing lamp crashes to the floor,

illuminating her in blinding white light. A dark, terrifying shape emerges from the shadows.

Cypher holds the syringe aloft like a dagger, coolly intones, “Just another loose end your atomic father left for me to tie up,” and lunges.

“*Cut! Great! Print!*”

With no need to remove the camera from the dolly, they roll in close for a reveal of Marsh’s identity.

Breathing rapidly, Cynthia falls into her chair, breasts heaving. Cypher raises the luminous syringe, and the camera follows his black-gloved hand to discover his stone-cold visage looming above her. Jon’s predatory features register no emotion as he brings the needle down.

It’s a wrap at precisely 1:45 am. Eric and I spend a few minutes up in Tobe’s office, discussing the night’s events and plans for the days ahead.

He tells us that the climax of the film is still very much up in the air, that even he’s not certain exactly how it’s going to end. He muses that the giant crystal ball in Lisa’s apartment might figure prominently in the denouement. Possessed by Sam’s indomitable spirit and greedily absorbing power from the nuclear plant, the crystalline sphere could conceivably generate a critical mass of white-hot plasma, producing an unstoppable chain reaction that ultimately results in the annihilation of the city, the countryside, and beyond.

Or not.

Tobe loves that crystal ball, telling us that he hopes to take it home with him once the shoot is over.

Looking over tomorrow’s call sheet, I see that William Prince is listed as Lewis Olander. So he has been cast in the role after all.

Wednesday, April 5, 1989 - Day 27

It’s high noon on the hottest day of the year. The record temperature for this date is 90°. It’s currently 105°, and for the first time in weeks, we’re working outside in daylight. The heat is blistering.

The entryway and lobby to Stage 4 has been transformed into “Café Kitsch,” a trendy, upscale bistro. Trim green hedgerows enclose the outdoor dining area. Elegant powder blue linen tablecloths, long-stemmed crystal wine glasses, and gleaming silver flatware bedeck the intimate tables of the restaurant, cooled in the shade of royal blue market umbrellas. Parking

valets stand by, and gaily dressed patrons wait to be seated. Olander's stretch limousine rests at the curb, with an ambulance close at hand in the event that the fragile old man requires medical assistance.

William Prince walks onto the set, looking more hale and hearty than I had anticipated.

Craig, apparently unfamiliar with Prince's long and impressive list of film credits, inquires, "Is this Olander? That old guy?"

Brian says with a smirk, "That's *this week's* Olander!"

(From here on in, Prince's character is almost exclusively referred to as "Old-lander.")

The woman cast as Sam's bitchy ex-wife Rachel is Dey Young, a cool blonde in the vein of Alfred Hitchcock's heroines Kim Novak and Eva Marie Saint.

I recognize her from her role in Wes Craven's *The Serpent and The Rainbow*, in which she bites into a wine glass, chews on the bloody shards, and reels into madness. Dey is married to David Ladd, the producer of the film.

Notably, she is also the younger sister of Leigh Taylor-Young, star of taboo-busting '60s soap opera *Peyton Place* and ex-wife to pugilistic film star Ryan O'Neal.

The day's first scene takes place inside the limo. An invalid, Olander waits in the car for his granddaughter. Having stuck Sam with the lunch bill, Rachel encourages him to follow her outside to greet the old man. Breathing oxygen through a nasal tube, Olander is self-absorbed. When he spies Sam, however, his face immediately brightens, and he seems a changed man.

There are two cameras on the shot, tightly focused through the car window. Once Dey climbs into the car and Brad leans his body through the door, they are all at extremely close quarters. On the first take, squished together like sardines, they all break up laughing.

Craig has commandeered one of the market umbrellas for his sound cart. Today is unfortunately his last day on the show. He's agreed to fill in for another sound mixer on a more expensive film. Who can blame him?

He tells me a hilarious story about stumbling on another film crew nearby, accessing their radio frequency and wreaking havoc on their set by broadcasting random interjections like, "Hold the roll!" or "Um, *cut!*" or

“That’s a wrap!” He knew he was busted after hearing an angry AD on the wire: “Okay, that’s it! Everybody *off the radios!*”

Levie uncharacteristically smokes a cigarette while his crew sets up for the next shot; as Rachel leaves the restaurant, she turns and gives Sam a look of pitying superiority.

Dey’s slinky body language conveys Rachel’s withering contempt in a few broad strokes. She nails the shot in one take, earning the crew’s eternal gratitude, as we can now move inside and escape the sweltering heat.

While waiting for the restaurant interior to be readied, Tobe meets in his office with Steve Brooks and Guy Faria to evaluate their ideas for Sam’s sparking finger effect. When Steve demonstrates it on his own finger, the spark travels several feet. Curious how the thing works, Tobe examines the firing device, made up primarily of aluminum wire, electricians’ tape, and phosphorus match heads.

Aiming to improve its operation, Tobe ends up dismantling the thing entirely.

I meet Kat’s replacement, new 2nd AD Michael Looney. He seems a nice enough guy, but I miss Kat. Sanford has also moved on to another project, and with Craig leaving, the end of filming seems fast upon us.

I hear lots of talk on the set about upcoming job prospects. Consequently, my sketchbook is being passed around like a high school yearbook. Julia contributes a beautiful colored-pencil sketch of a woman with flaming eyes and lips. Jon Cypher draws a bizarre, childish pencil rendition of himself as a robot being rescued from the set by a flying saucer labeled “genuine UFO.” A word balloon above Cypher’s head reads: “Oh, God! Another 16-hour day!”

The café is a typical affluent eatery, decorated in southwest pastels and hung with minimalist art prints. Bow-tied waiters flit from table to table, serving the fashionable diners. A neon “CAFÉ” sign glows green against the back wall. The stairwell to the second floor presumably leads to the kitchen.

Scene 28: Sam arrives at the restaurant intending to meet his ex-wife for lunch but is dismayed to her bantering at a table with Dr. Marsh, with whom she may have had an adulterous affair. Adding injury to insult, even though Sam has shown up at the appointed time, they’ve already finished their meal. After an awkward exchange of words, Marsh excuses himself

and bolts for the door, leaving Sam and Rachel to settle into uncomfortable conversation.

The camera sits at the front of the café, facing the back wall. Carin Hooper sits at a table in the corner with writer/director Mick Garris and his lovely wife Cynthia, all three making cameo appearances in the film as well-to-do restaurant patrons.

Mick has written several episodes of Steven Spielberg's TV series *Amazing Stories* and also wrote and directed the horror comedy *Critters 2*. (Between takes, he draws a quick cartoon of a man with his head in flames in the sketchbook.)^[25]

The camera rolls. Large in the foreground, Brad brushes off the maître d' and worms his way over to the table. Cypher's clear discomfort with the situation is really very amusing, and his stiff exit makes me laugh.

In the scene, Marsh pointedly refuses to shake Sam's hand. Is he just being rude, or does he suspect some danger in Sam's touch?

They get the master shot on one take, but Tobe asks for another, for "safety."

Some of the dialogue is priceless. When Rachel insists that she and Marsh just innocently "bumped into" each other, Brad puts a licentious spin on Sam's line "Yeah, you used to 'bump' into each other a lot when we were married, too!"

On the wall of the wardrobe room upstairs, Carin has posted dozens of variations on the proposed design for the crew jacket's embroidered emblem and is soliciting opinions from everyone, though the final decision will be hers and hers alone. (Of course, Tobe's input is likely to carry a lot of weight.)

Using a sharpie, someone has drawn faces on all the apples, green and red, on the craft service table.

Craig crafts a "wrap-time dartboard," enabling the crew to predict when we will finish for the night with the toss of a dart. It's already quite late, after 2:00 am.

They move the camera close to the table for a two-shot of Brad and Dey. Brad looks tired. There are dark circles under his eyes, and despite his "handsome" makeup, his face looks drawn. It must be that the weeks of long hours are taking their toll. After all, he is featured in virtually every scene. But his energy is high, and he shows no outward signs of fatigue.

The two of them sit unnaturally close with a bowl of white daisies separating them, another intimation of exploding suns.

Dey Young's Rachel is a brittle ice queen, beautiful but bad for your health. She oozes condescension and regards Sam as if he were a bug. Dragging deeply on her slender cigarette, she seeks to emasculate him with her insinuating gaze, as she must have done so many times in the past.

As for Cypher, every word that he utters as Marsh is larded with sarcasm and replete with double meanings.

The scene is a potential minefield for the actors, but they make it look like child's play. The frisson between Brad and Dey is all the more impressive considering that (as far as I know) they've never met before today. Their turbulent domestic history is easy to imagine.

Cypher's close-up is exceedingly good. Marsh is a fully realized character. It's a bit ironic that his first appearance in the film is Jon Cypher's last day on the set.

Today is also Dey's first *and* last day with us.

The camera is situated at the back of the room to shoot Rachel's haughty exit. Behind the camera, both Tobe and Levie puff on huge stogies as Nancy waves away the billowing clouds of cigar smoke David, wearing a casual sport coat and toking a cigar, makes a cameo appearance in the background as the restaurant's harried manager. He's such a natural that the crew gives him a big round of applause.

Bill Roberts pokes fun at him: "Robert De Niro *is* David Hayball in *The David Hayball Story!*"

Wrap is at 5:00 am.

In the sketchbook, Eric draws an excellent two-page "flip-book" of Sam's birthmark, first small and then enlarged, so it can be made to grow with the flip of a page.

Thursday, April 6, 1989 - Day 28

At 6:00 pm, my first stop when I get to the stage is the set of Olander's voluminous foyer. It's spacious yet somehow claustrophobic. Marble pillars stand sentry on a plinth in the doorway. The polished linoleum floor is patterned in black and white checkerboard squares (a representation of Olander's cynical vision that mere human beings are nothing more than pawns in his grandiose game of bio-military chess?). Appropriately enough,

an inlaid tortoise shell chessboard with ivory figurines sits on a mahogany heirloom table in a corner of the set.

Construction of the room is complete. Gene Abel and his crew have worked miracles in spatial economy, making the area seem much larger than it actually is. Parts of other sets have been salvaged and reconfigured, e.g., Olander's elevator is the same one from Lisa's building, and in fact hasn't moved an inch.

Set decorator Ann Job and her trusty crew are in the process of dressing the vast entryway with furniture, props, and artwork. Cardboard boxes containing silver chalices and brass candelabra sit open on the floor. Louis XIV chairs and antique sideboards are carefully placed around the room. Renaissance portraits and modernist paintings lean against the walls, waiting to be hung. Roman limestone sculptures rest on the floor beside enormous Chinese porcelain vases.

Back inside Café Kitsch, Tobe and the camera crew shoot the remainder of yesterday's scene, in which Sam is accused of walking the check by the maître d' and the waiter threatens him with prosecution. The actor playing the rude waiter is in actuality a complete jerk, managing to alienate most of the crew—a perfect example of typecasting. As a practical lesson to all ill-behaved actors, Tobe frames the shot to cut off his head.

They move quickly to Brad's sparking finger gag. Infuriated at being ambushed by Marsh's presence and furthermore left to pay the bill, Sam pops one of his homeopathic pills and fumes. Suddenly, a plume of flame leaps from his fingertip and he dashes into the restroom.

While waiting on Guy to rig Brad's finger for the effect, Tobe performs a bit of magic, using a scrap of flash paper to conjure a fireball seemingly from thin air. Beside him, David amusingly wears thick eyebrows and a goatee made from strips of black electrical tape, looking like a mustache-twirling villain from a turn of the century melodrama.

"Okay, we're hot!" says Guy.

The camera rolls and the dolly performs a sweet little forward move as the spark goes off. Tobe doesn't see the flash during the first take, but luckily, I'm sitting right below him with the video camera rolling. I show him the playback and he's pleased with the effect.

For good measure, they do a quick second take, and the café is history.

In the mansion interior, Tobe walks the set with Levie and the other department heads, talking through Sam and Olander's confrontation scene,

blocking the movement of the actors and the placement of the camera.

Ordinarily shut away in their offices upstairs, producer Jim Rogers and executive producer Henry Bushkin conspicuously accompany the group on their walk-through. Tobe's in a fine mood, humming and grinning as he puffs his cigar and sips his Dr. Pepper.

Meanwhile, Brad settles into the makeup chair to begin his three-hour transformation from man into monster. In one day of filming, he's going from his handsome best to his extreme worst: body horribly desecrated, scorched and scarred and festering away from within.

In an effort to spare the exorbitant rental cost of an expensive crystal chandelier, the producers have assigned Richard McGuire the task of building one from scratch. Aluminum bands bent into concentric circles of diminishing size form the foundation of his design, an apparent nod to the film's theme of atomic power gone wrong.

As talented as Richard undeniably is, I must say that at this point it looks nothing like any chandelier that I've ever seen.

In a free moment, Bill Roberts does a spot-on caricature of Tobe in the sketchbook.

Meanwhile, Frank tools around the stage in Olander's deluxe mechanized wheelchair, running over Todd's foot in passing.

When the set dressers think their work in Olander's entry hall is done, Tobe proceeds to reorganize the furniture to his liking. He's especially taken with an antique mantle clock, which he instructs be moved to a French walnut console table below the room's prominent glazed octagonal window.

The application of Brad's extensive makeup is a joint operation between Steve Neill and Bill Miller-Jones. Steve applies the prosthetics and Bill paints in the details.

Brad's 14-year-old daughter Kristina comes for a visit while he's in the chair. Far from being put off by his grotesque appearance, she says that she loves it. In fact, she does a wonderful drawing of him in his late-stage makeup for the sketchbook.

Dressed casually in polo shirt and khaki trousers, William Prince stops by the set for a look. His first shot is still hours away.

I overhear Steve Neill saying, "William just met Brad. Brad, in his horrific makeup, looked up at him and said, '*See what you did to me?!*'"

Even though no shooting is taking place, the stage is still a hive of activity. That is, until lunchtime arrives at 11:00 pm and there's a veritable

stampede for the catering truck.

Back from lunch, Levie wheels around the set in Olander's chair as he consults with David on lighting.

"Whaddya' think, the ten-K?," asks David.

"Yep, yep, yep, yep, yep!" is Levie's cheery reply as he whisks across the checkerboard floor.

Hung between two ladders, Richard's makeshift chandelier is now festooned with acrylic prisms and strung with Christmas lights. A blinding white light bulb brightly burns inside.

Tobe is not at all satisfied. I hear him telling Levie, "Well, they're building another...if that doesn't work, we need to go to the prop house."

The chandelier is an essential element. In the script, Sam saps its power to feed his final fiery self-sacrifice.

Eric has gone grey. Kerry has powdered his hair so he can act as Prince's lighting double. He wears Olander's velvet smoking jacket, hangs his head in weary decrepitude, and affects a hollow, raspy voice, sounding more like Marlon Brando in *The Godfather* than anything else.

Wearing his fright wig, Adriano doubles for Brad and enacts the scene with Eric in a broadly comic pantomime.

During camera rehearsal, I convince Levie to run some film on Eric as Olander, a special surprise for dailies.

Finally, at 4:00 am, William Prince folds into his wheelchair in full costume and makeup, clutching his script pages in his lap.

More than one member of the crew has compared the foyer set to the "white room" at the end of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which teleported astronaut Bowman grows old in the blink of an eye. With his smoking jacket and palsied quiver, Prince even bears a passing resemblance to Keir Dullea in his old-age makeup.

In this, *Spontaneous Combustion*'s penultimate scene, the hopelessly mutated, mutilated protagonist literally meets his maker. Olander is seen first as a shrunken silhouette in the greenish cast of the elevator's fluorescents. Smoldering in the darkness, Sam relishes the opportunity to confront him with the deadly fruits of his foul labors.

It's a classic horror film trope, the moment when the creature destroys his creator.

During rehearsals, William appears to be having some difficulty with his lines, but it's hard to tell whether he's just playing senile or actually having problems with his memory. After all, the man is 77 years old. On the other hand, he's an excellent actor. His phlegmy wheezing and hacking are alarming, but the wily twinkle in his eyes and his forced joviality suggest something deeper—that Olander is doing what he has always done, trying to gain a strategic advantage by playing on the sympathies of others. His rebuke to Sam, “You know, you're *awfully ungrateful!*” is both appalling and tragically funny.

When the camera rolls, his delivery is word-perfect and his performance unexpectedly robust, as if he's suddenly tapped into a hidden reservoir of energy. When Tobe calls “Cut!” there are exclamations of “*Wow!*” and a round of applause from the crew.

Sam's emotions in this scene are at a fever pitch, and Brad is really keyed up. Sam is in bad shape. Drenched in hot sweat, his eye swollen over and cauterized, his shoulder blasted and oozing glowing green goo, he's ill prepared to do battle with his conniving ex-grandfather-in-law. “Lew, *you killed my parents!*” is at once a blistering accusation and a feral cry of anguish.

Brad was giving it all he's got when the camera was focused on William. But when the camera is turned around to favor Brad, it appears almost as if Prince is spent. Nancy has to prompt him on nearly every line.

Poor Brad. This is his most gut-wrenching moment in the film, but William's befuddled fumfering is throwing him off his game. Several times Brad has to stop in the middle of a take to find his feet.

Eventually, after many stalled attempts, William is released for the night and Brad plays the scene without him. Even up against Nancy's monotonous line readings, he brings great truth and power to his portrayal of a man coming apart at the seams. But he's not easily satisfied. After one take, he calls out to Tobe, “Can we do that again? That was *rancid* for me, Boss!”

Richard's craftwork chandelier is dispensed with.

Ann arrives to the stage with a gorgeous French cut glass crystal chandelier. It goes without saying that it's a vast improvement over the alternative.

Together, Richard and the guys in the art department hoist it to the ceiling and secure it to the stage's metal grid.

Scenic artist Blake Beltram contributes a drawing of the ill-fated chandelier to the sketchbook with the accompanying words of wisdom:

Instructions for building your own chandelier

1. Go to the prop store and rent one.
2. When you're done, return it

It's the end of a long, long night. We wrap at 9:30 am(!).

On the drive home, Eric takes a wrong turn, and we end up on some gloomy side street in Van Nuys. Out of nowhere, Janet from wardrobe pulls up alongside us. She cocks her thumb to the rear, and we see that Cameron is driving the car behind her. This is thirty miles from the stage and more than an hour after wrap. They both wave and speed away, leaving Eric and me blinking at each other in confusion.

Friday, April 7, 1989 - Day 29

New 2nd assistant director Michael Looney likes Bill Robert's drawing of Tobe so much that he's memorialized it on today's call sheet, to which I've appended the following actual quote:

"There's nothing like a good cigar at five in the morning!"

—T. Griffith

It's actually early morning on Saturday, April 8th. Today's call time was 11:00 pm, and just over an hour has passed in preparation for the first shot: Olander stokes Sam's anger and revels in the awesome power of his "creation."

Brad must have come in early, as he's already in full makeup and wardrobe. With his hair limp from sweat, his skin pale and sickly, and his dour demeanor, he could be terminally ill.

Robinson has been tasked with drawing up cue cards to assist Bill Prince with his dialogue if necessary. Compounding his difficulty are the considerable changes that have been made to his lines. The rewriting continues on the set, in part to accommodate Prince, in part to clarify the character's motivation. Tobe defers to Paul regarding medical jargon, on account of his grandfather having been a doctor. At his urging, the phrase

“designed to retard the growth of SHC molecules” is altered to read “designed to keep SHC molecules from forming”.

There are several such alterations, redactions, and additions, both large and small. In fact, the pages in Tobe’s script look like they’re riddled with diagrams of football plays.

Prince sits in Olander’s wheelchair on the set. Behind him, backlit on a glass shelf, rests an oriental porcelain plate on an ornamental stand, encircling his head in the halo of an eclipsing sun. When he gets a gander at the cue cards Robinson has made up for him, he demurs, “You *jest!*”

Scene 112a: Still stuck in a cold war mentality, Olander insists on the morality of his project, arguing its viability as a weapons system in support of his contention. The puppet master all along, he admits to having bribed Brian Bell to impregnate Peggy as part of his Machiavellian scheme.

He also reveals to Sam that Lisa too is an unwitting subject of the experiment, asserting that their romance has been contrived from the start, in the misguided expectation that their off-spring might ultimately conquer the power of SHC.

But in his dotage, he’s grown impatient and has surreptitiously triggered Sam’s nascent abilities, admitting pathetically, “I wanted to see what would happen.”

Apparently refreshed by a good long sleep, Bill’s first take is exceptional. He projects not only Olander’s overweening hubris but also his human frailty. He brings a certain logical consistency, twisted though it is, to Olander’s obsessive madness. As Sam’s ire rises, the light from the chandelier begins to surge and pulsate, casting fractured reflections across Prince’s face. He gazes on the culmination of his life’s cruel work with a child’s delight.

Tobe’s facial expressions mirror Bill’s, wide-eyed with awe and wonder, and he urges him on with whispers of “That’s it! It’s amazing, Bill, just *amazing!*”

Brad sits cross-legged on the chessboard floor, waiting patiently for his turn in front of the camera.

While Guy and his assistant Lou set up the fire effects for the next shot, Levie takes a joyride in the wheelchair. When asked his opinion of the décor, Levie raves, “I like the plate! It’s like the dark side of the moon!”

Craig has returned to the set after a day’s absence. Evidently his pressing responsibility was short-lived. Replacement boom operator Chris

Taylor remains on the show, as Cameron is nowhere to be seen. Chris has the ideal physique for a boom man, strong and tall and gangly. I suppose that it's entirely possible that Cameron has taken over Craig's other gig, but Craig is not forthcoming about his absence.

Two cameras, one low and one high, are trained on Olander in the scene.

The chandelier has been rigged with a 1,000-watt bulb on a dimmer, so that when Brad stands huffing beneath it, the electricians can oscillate its brightness in concert with his rising fury.

Guest grip Marcus "Roo" Flowers stands on a ladder with a strand of fishing line attached to the chandelier, tugging it gently to make the beaded glass prisms tremble and spattering the room with darts of reactive light.

William Prince's last shot is dangerous. A huge ball of fire will discharge only inches in front of his face. Considering his age, it's potentially a recipe for disaster. Of course, every safety precaution is taken, but there's always the remote possibility that something could go wrong. To his credit, Bill seems not to be the least bit concerned.

When everything is in readiness, Paul calls for quiet and the cameras roll.

The shot begins with Prince's look of astonishment as the shimmering glow of the chandelier steadily rises.

Tobe exhorts him breathlessly, "and watching...*my God!* Burst into flames! Up he goes!" as Bill's face transforms into a grinning mask of ghastly admiration. Tobe cues the effects: "Reactive lights up...and flickering...and smoke...and flickering, *fire!*" As Guy releases a fireball in front of the camera lens, instantaneously a wall of flames erupts right in front of Bill, the sudden blast of heat forcing him to recoil. "*Cut!*"

Waving away the smoke, Bill's measured reaction to the effect is "*Hoo!*"

Paul leads the applause, acknowledging his inestimable work and respectfully releasing him from the film. ^[26]

We break for lunch at 5:00 am. Bill Prince shows his inherent sweetness and modesty by joining the crew in the lunch line, content to stand with us and chat. That is, until co-producer Jerry Lambert spots him.

He insists that Bill step out of line and has PA Sean Williams prepare him a plate.

The sketchbook is filling up. Electrician Molly Cheshire has done a terrific impressionist drawing of colorful crystal flames. Art director Richard McGuire has supplied yet another fine piece, a frighteningly accurate cartoon of UPM Sanford Hampton.

As for myself, I've contributed a not-altogether-flattering caricature of Paul stomping his feet in frustration and railing in a chilly word balloon, "Shut the FUCK up!"

The sun has risen.

Returning from lunch, the crew faces what is probably the most complex camera move in the film.

As the shot is designed, the camera sits high on the dolly as Brad enters through the mansion's large oak doors, crying out, "*Lew!* Uncle Samson's here!"

Retreating as he approaches, the camera then tracks with him, executing a revolution of nearly 360° and in the process revealing the full scope of the room's luxurious interior. Brad lingers beneath the glowing chandelier, appearing to feed off its pulsating energy. The camera follows Brad's gaze up to the brilliantly shining light, then tilts back down and dollies diagonally forward as he lowers himself painfully onto an antique settee placed nearby.

Preparations for the shot are both extensive and labor intensive. They rehearse the camera move again and again. The maneuver is complicated and difficult, requiring any number of awkward perambulations. Dana must sneak under the camera lens *twice* as the camera follows Brad's incursion into the room. Midway through the shot, Lou also has to duck in below the camera's view in order to blow smoke into Brad's jacket. In order to mike the shot, Chris has to stand on a ladder behind the set and lower the boom over the wall. As always, unwanted shadows are an overriding concern.

Tobe meanders around the set, thoughtfully tugging on his beard as the crew labors to work out the kinks.

Brad paces the floor meditatively, pointedly avoiding any unnecessary interaction with others, but clearly anxious to get on with it. "Wanna try a rehearsal?" he asks Tobe at every opportunity.

Asked to keep Brad's tattered jacket primed with the phosphorus liquid, Steve Neill can't resist moaning, "Cyalume is *not* my department—makeup

effects *is*. I've said it before and I'll say it again." He holds up the glowing green cylinder and repeats, "This is *not* my department."

After Bill Roberts has mopped twice, Tobe suggests that everybody on the set remove their shoes to prevent scuffing the floor's highly polished surface.

Ever the faithful lieutenant, Todd barks to the crew, "Shoes *off*!"

Craig has enlisted Carin as guest sound mixer. Perched at the sound cart, wearing headphones and smoking a cigarette, she boldly calls out "Speed!" as the camera rolls, seemingly quite pleased with herself.

All the careful planning and patience pay off in the end. When they finally get the shot, it's a thing of beauty.

As Brad shambles through the doorway, a bright light flares the lens like the rings of Saturn.

Levie's camera movement is buttery smooth, and all of the pieces fall together like the simple solution to a thorny algebra problem.

The long hours are definitely taking their toll, and several members of the crew doze off. The stage is uncommonly quiet. It may be bright daylight outside, but it's perpetual night in here.

Tobe, however, seems unstoppable. His energy puts us all to shame.

The next setup is essentially Olander's POV as Sam backs away, infuriated and inconsolable.

Since William Prince is no longer with us, our second 2nd AD Michael Looney stands in to provide Brad with an eyeline while Nancy reads Olander's lines in her stilted, colorless way.

Scene 112c: Dripping green bile and blood from the bullet hole in his hand, Sam retreats from Olander's predatory advance, infusing himself with the chandelier's electrical energy to stoke the flames of the furnace blazing within. When Olander contends that he should be thanked for bestowing him with such an extraordinary gift, Sam scoffs, "*Thank* you?!" yodeling a hysterical hyena's laugh at the absurdity of the thought. The gold watch chimes midnight and, as Olander watches in amazement, Sam explodes into an all-consuming human bonfire.

The composition of the shot is interesting. Brad backs into the frame as the camera dollies back and booms low, then immediately rushes forward, rising into a tight close-up on his stricken face as he sways beneath the chandelier.

In stark contrast to the raging inferno growing inside Sam's body, the moonlight streaming through the room's octagonal window bathes Brad in hues of cool, comforting blue.

While it seems less elaborate than the previous shot, in rehearsal there is no shortage of problems to be addressed.

Lou has trouble timing his smoke bursts.

Todd runs over the battery cable with the dolly, causing Dana to tumble to the floor.

Eric gets underfoot and Todd, perhaps testy from his own mishap, excoriates him, "You're fucking everything up, dude!"

Brad looks a wreck, and he's agitated by the delays. But, as he's a complete professional, he never utters a complaint. Instead, he restrains himself, channeling his frustration to use in the scene.

When everything's in place and they're finally ready to roll, things don't go quite as smoothly as hoped. There's either too much smoke or not enough. Lou's head bobs into frame. Reading from the script, Nancy still manages to confuse Olander's lines, provoking Brad to call for a cut in the middle of a take. He'd rather play the scene without her and suggests as much. I'm inclined to believe that Tobe thinks Brad's aggravation serves the scene well, and so he insists that Nancy continue to feed him his cues.

Through it all, on camera and off, Brad sustains his heavy breathing and disheveled posture, striving to stay "in the moment."

Yet despite all the distractions, his performance is extraordinary. When he spits out the word "bitch," he blows a ring of smoke directly into the camera lens. Smoke cascades over his shoulders like roiling storm clouds. His chest heaves, his teeth clench, and his jaw juts brutishly forward as he gazes longingly into the chandelier's brilliant bright light. Ultimately, he's swallowed up in a radiant cyclone of blinding whiteness.

"Cut! *Very* good!" Tobe calls out enthusiastically.

Many on the crew, Levie included, mistakenly conclude that this is the last shot of the night. However, there still remains the little matter of Sam's fiery demise.

Mounted on a plywood board and dressed in Brad's wardrobe of tan slacks and dark blue jacket, Tony and Eric carry in one of the cable-driven wooden dummies and position it beneath the chandelier, using sandbags to secure it in place. Its head is sculpted in aluminum foil and painted black. From under the jacket, acetylene hoses clamped to the arms and neck lead

to a propane tank just off the set. A replica of Sam's gold watch dangles from its latex fingertips.

I've been asked to puppeteer the dummy's head while Tony and Eric articulate the flexible arms. Molly the medic is assigned to operate the drop lever. A hole is cut in one wall of the set and the cables are fed through it, enabling us to operate remotely. A video monitor is set up so we can watch the burn from the camera's POV.

Eric is eager to have the shot come off well, so he has his hands in everything.

Bleary-eyed, Levie reclines on the dolly and asks for furniture pads to protect the camera crew from the flames, on second thought adding, "And soak *mine* with water!"

Since both Eric and I are otherwise occupied, Robinson videotapes the proceedings. As he tapes our preparations, Roo comes up to him and says gingerly, "Robinson? Robinson?" then suddenly blasts him with, "Get the fuck out of the way, dude!" But with Roo, as everyone knows, it's all meant in fun. He lumbers away with a cheerful, "Just kidding, dude."

Practically everyone on the set is dog-tired, but energy levels increase noticeably as the big moment draws near.

Using a megaphone so we can hear his instructions from off the set, Tobe calls "*Action!*"

Tony, Eric, and I furiously work the cable controls. The dummy twitches and writhes, then is suddenly engulfed in a blazing golden fireball. Jets of flame shoot from its extremities, emitting earsplitting, high-pitched screeches. As the fire intensifies, the dummy's head spasms and jerks and its arms flail about wildly.

Tobe shouts "*Drop!*"

Molly pulls the lever, and the thing falls heavily to its knees, burning in supplication as scorched embers litter the ground around.

"*Cut! Shit, that was great!*" exults Tobe.

As Lou rushes in to extinguish the smoldering heap, hoots and hollers and cheers from the crew echo from the walls of the soundstage.

Tobe is ecstatic. "Well, *that's* never been done before!"

Tony gets a huge round of applause, almost blushing from all the approbation.

It's been a long, productive but exhausting day. Over sixteen hours. We wrap at 3:30 pm on Saturday. Eric and I meet with Tobe in his office afterwards. (I note that he's still wearing his nuclear power button, which he's had pinned to his shirt every day for the past week.)

According to the original schedule, today was intended to be the last day of shooting, but Tobe happily informs us that he's managed to finagle a few extra days to allow him to finish the film to his satisfaction. It looks like we'll be back again next week.

As far as I can tell, the movie still doesn't have an ending.

WEEK SEVEN

BURN UNIT

Tuesday, April 11, 1989 - Day 30

Return to Tiny Town! We arrive to the stage about 6:00 pm and are greeted by the insistent thrum of chattering voices as preparations are underway for the first complex setup.

Lisa's apartment is now dimly lit. Only neon pools of pastel light and the quartz crystals glowing in the corners provide relief from the darkness. Outside the window, the lights of the miniature city burn brightly. As the electrical crew rehearses the effects of the brewing storm, lightning illuminates the little town in intermittent flashes of blinding white light.

Since I'm an extra pair of hands, I'm assigned to control the lightning over the distant horizon.

Levie's devised a number scheme, calling out "One! Two! Three! Four!" in succession as he wants each separate lightning effect to flash. When it works, it creates the convincing sensation that an electrical storm is travelling over the landscape.

Tobe walks and talks Cynthia through the scene, having a quietly intense discussion as havoc reigns all around them, covering every inch of the set in the process. He instructs her to traverse the set in a wide arc, comparing it to the promenade of a grande dame across a theatrical stage.

Later, the power in the building will seem to have gone crazy, lights fluctuating and palpitating like some mad, out-of-control discotheque. The room's lighting fixtures have been rigged to an electrical scanner system designed to flash them on and off at random.

In this sequence, it may well be that Sam's disincorporate consciousness has taken control of the city's power grid, terrorizing Lisa with his awesome, newfound capacity. After Marsh's unsuccessful attempt to trigger

her own inbred flammability with an injection of some vile liquid, Lisa flees the apartment in terror.

Tobe explains to Cynthia how Sam invades Marsh's body: "First it's Marsh, but the closer you look, the less you think it's Marsh. In fact, it's Sam."

The day's first shot features the camera at the end of the apartment's long hallway. Cynthia enters the apartment carrying Sam's gold watch. Marsh has given it to Lisa as the last remaining vestiges of Sam's wretched existence. She walks to the head of the hallway and calls out tentatively, "Sam?"

Startled by a flash of lightning, she wheels about, and the camera hurtles down the hall towards her.

Before they roll on the second take, Craig issues a warning to the crew: "Nobody move! There was a lot of noise in here last time!" Like a prim substitute schoolteacher, he taunts everyone further with the empty threat "I'll call *names* next time!"

Both Tobe and Levie are wearing bright red shirts today. Are they coordinating their outfits? Seems unlikely.

To commemorate the "Summer of *Batman*," i.e., the upcoming release of Tim Burton's much-anticipated film, Eric wears a T-shirt featuring a flurry of bats and the "Bat-Signal" searchlight, with his nuclear power pin smack in the middle of the Bat-Symbol.

Guy Faria is wearing a pale yellow T-shirt emblazoned across the back, "I'm Outa Here SFX."

Greg Gault is on the set in Marsh's getup and with his hair powdered white. He's here to perform a stunt in which Marsh is blown over the couch by a blast of energy from the kinetically electrified power lines, likely under the control of Sam's demoniacal free-floating persona.

The shot requires two cameras, the air mortar, plenty of flashbulbs, and the kaleidoscope of disco lights in the apartment. There's so much going on that it often seems as if everybody is talking at once.

Cynthia is hell-bent on screaming during the take, but Tobe thinks it could prevent the effects team from hearing their cues, explaining to her all the complicated elements of the shot.

At the same time, Greg tries to get a straight answer from Guy about the precise timing of the mortar blast, with frustrating results.

As always, Tobe is keenly attuned to every little detail, even if the placement of a prop is off by only an inch or two. Cynthia seems to have acquired a bit of this trait, alerting Tobe to the fact that Lisa's purse had been on the table in previous shots. Appreciating her input, he nevertheless assures her that even if it were there, no one would ever see it.

Standing behind Cynthia in Marsh's position, Greg seems deeply concentrated. He bounces on the balls of his feet to loosen up in preparation for the stunt.

Noticing everything, Tobe points out the needle in Greg's hand. "Um, that's the wrong syringe."

Bill Roberts explains that it's just meant to be used for rehearsal, and that it will be replaced with the actual prop just before they roll.

Tobe insists that Cynthia wear earplugs as protection from the sound of the air mortar, also reminding her, "Remember, he needs to hit the ground *before* you're up and out!"

Paul calls for last looks. "Here we go, please! Picture!"

Guy cautions everybody, "Okay, watch the mortar, please! I'm plugging in." Evidently, there's some danger that the mortar could go off spontaneously.

Steve Brooks speaks up. "Nobody here touch the scanner!"

Greg continues to bend and stretch to limber up.

Chewing on an unlit cigar, Tobe goes over the cues one last time. "On action...yeah, you (Greg) start jiggling, then I say 'flash!' The flashbulbs will go, the flash paper on his back will go, then Guy hits him with the air mortar, and over he goes! All right?"

Cynthia still has her heart set on a scream, imploring Tobe, "Should I scream? Can I scream *one time* before we start?"

Finally, they're ready to roll. Greg is bent over double with his head down to hide his face from the cameras. When Tobe reminds him to wriggle on "action," Greg cracks, "I'm gonna look like Elvis Presley if you leave me here too long!" and waggles his knees like the hillbilly warbler.

Tobe calls "Action!" As Greg jiggles his head, a cascade of talcum powder pours from his hair. The flashbulbs pop, the mortar blows, and Greg hurls himself over the back of the red leather sofa.

Watching through the video camera, I'm frankly shocked when bursts of flame leap up the walls of the set as the mortar goes off. I had no idea that was going to happen.

As soon as Cynthia leaps up from her chair and runs from the room, Tobe yells, “*Cut!*”

“Looks good!” says Levie as the set bursts into applause.

Spotting me with the video camera, Tobe beckons me over. “Let me see it back, Stan!”

“You got it!” I say, always eager to please.

Watching the playback, Tobe notices the talcum powder debacle and insists on another take. This is no small matter, as stuntmen don’t work for a flat rate, but are paid each and every time they perform a stunt.

On the second take, Greg heaves himself over the couch with even greater velocity, unintentionally knocking over a lamp and colliding with a large decorative sculpture.

After the cut, Levie calls out, “You okay, Greg?”

Tobe also asks, “You okay, man?”

When Greg gets to his feet, perfectly fine, he receives another enthusiastic round of applause.

Nancy has moved on to another show, so we have a new script supervisor. Jeanne Talbot is Nancy’s polar opposite, but no less meticulous in her work ethic. She’s quiet and friendly and intensely focused on her duties.

Michael Looney has included on today’s call sheet both Richard’s drawing of Sanford and my caricature of Paul, with one telling alteration: “Shut the *fuck* up!” has been changed to the more pedestrian but less objectionable “Quiet!”

For the next shot, Cynthia sits in her chair as the camera looks down on her from above. It’s her close-up as Marsh assaults her with the syringe containing the bilious green fluid.

Even though no stunt work is involved, Greg continues as Marsh’s stand-in. He towers above Cynthia with the syringe poised to strike.

Tobe steps up onto the dolly and looks through the camera’s viewfinder. As he watches, he instructs Greg and Cynthia in short staccato phrases. “From the top, okay? All right, and *look*, and *line*...!”

Greg mumbles something unintelligibly.

Tobe continues, “That’s good. Now look back up at him, look at *him*! Look down at your hand again! Look back at him! All right, throw your look to the other side, quick! Flash, flash! And hold the watch up, drop it!” then mutters matter-of-factly to himself, “That’ll work.”

In this shot, Cynthia finally gets her wish. Tobe instructs her to let loose a “long, sustained scream.”

Bill Miller-Jones spritzes her with movie sweat while Julia and Kerry flutter around her, respectively adjusting her wardrobe and tweaking her hair.

When the camera rolls, Jeanne reads Marsh’s line, “Just another atomic loose end...” Her mellifluous voice is a welcome antidote to Nancy’s dreadful bray. (Don’t get me wrong, I love Nancy. But her voice? Seriously.)

Cynthia’s feeling mischievous. After the take, she clasps her hand and whimpers, “He got me!” No one seems to heed her, so she repeats, “He *got* me!”

“He did?” says Tobe, genuinely concerned. With a twinkle in her eye and a giggle, she makes it clear that she was only fooling.

Relieved, Greg sighs, “As my career flashes by me...!”

It’s fascinating how this segment of the film is being shot so completely out of sequence. We began a week ago with Cynthia being blown into the chair and Jon Cypher as Marsh sneaking up behind her. Then, this morning we shot her entering the apartment at the beginning of the scene. After that, we were back with her in the chair with Greg Gault attacking her as Marsh. Now, we’re out on the porch to shoot the prelude to the blast that blows Cynthia off her feet.

Guy rigs the fuse box outside the sliding glass doors to spark and fly open as the electrical surge crackling down the power lines reaches the apartment.

Across the stage in his workshop area, Tony checks the cable controls to his aluminum animatronic, now topped by a sculpted aluminum skull with an articulate jaw. Four control boxes, each with multiple levers, are attached to twenty-foot-long cables strung out along the stage floor.

Tony explains to me for the first time how the articulated man is intended to be used in the film: when Marsh rises up from behind Lisa’s sofa, his body is eaten away by all-consuming flames, leaving nothing behind but a charred, withered skeleton, still impossibly alive.

Compared to the overwhelming lethargy of Saturday, everybody’s energy levels are high. Some folks actually whistle while they work. A few days off can do wonders for one’s constitution.

Cynthia sits in Lisa's chair, chewing gum and waiting. When Tobe reminds her to spit out her gum, she kids, "But my whole motivation in the scene is chewing gum, Tobe!"

He counters, "Well, on 'action,' just hold it still!"

Their rapport has dramatically improved over the last few days, and they both seem much more relaxed and comfortable with each other. She playfully slaps a gum wrapper over her mouth, waiting for Tobe to notice.

Paul calls for a rehearsal, but Guy hasn't been paying attention. When Tobe calls, "Action!" he overreacts, "*No way!*"

"All right, I thought you wanted to rehearse the cues," says Levie.

"I do!" Guy responds, "I was tryin' to figure out what you're doin' here!"

"Rehearsin'," is Levie's laconic reply.

As has become customary, Tobe cues the effects during rehearsal: a blowing fan, flashes of lightning, an amber light rising to signify an approaching fireball, and ultimately, the fuse box blasting open and spraying sparks everywhere. He tells Cynthia to stay in position at the doorway "until sparks blow the hell out of that side wall!"

Everything goes well during the actual take. That is, except for the sparking fuse box. It begins at the top of the take, when the box pops open of its own accord.

Tobe notices instantly. "Uh..."

"Oh, the box just popped open a little bit," Guy helpfully observes.

"Well, *close* the son of a bitch!" Levie hollers, quite out of character.

Tobe shouts, "Lightning!" and the lightning flashes. He calls for reactive light and the reactive light resonates. He yells, "Spark!" and... nothing. "You gonna spark it?" he wonders, and calls for a cut, but Levie insists that they keep the cameras rolling.

"Still rolling!" yells Paul.

The slow-burning fuse leading to the electrical box reminds me of one of Wile E. Coyote's futile efforts to catch the elusive Road Runner.

Tobe's voice rises above the sound of the wind machine. "Gonna work?" He calls Cynthia back through the glass doors. "Are we gonna roll out of film before...?"

Tepid sparklers crawl along the fuse at an alarmingly slow rate. "Is it ever gonna speed up?"

“Yeah,” Guy says unconvincingly.

Waiting for the thing to blow, Tobe keeps calling for more lightning, more reactive light.

“Here it comes now!” Levie says hopefully.

Finally, the fuse box explodes, showering sparks in every direction.

Cynthia falls back into her chair, but Tobe’s not certain that the effect has run its course. He calls out to her, “Stand up! When it blows, sit down again!”

But the effect is spent. “Is that it, Guy?” Tobe asks.

“Yep,” Guy answers.

“Cut.”

Tobe is like a sphinx sometimes—difficult to read. I’d be willing to bet, though, that tonight he’s none too pleased with Guy’s performance.

Paul announces to the crew, “Thank you folks for another long one! Good work! See you in the morning!”

Of course, he really means “this evening,” as it’s already after 8:00 am when we wrap.

Wednesday, April 12, 1989 - Day 31

Tobe seems frustrated. It’s about 10:00 pm and he’s squatting on the floor in Lisa’s apartment, overseeing preparations for the “needle gag,” in which Marsh plunges the large hypodermic needle into Lisa’s arm and out the other side, squirting viscous green fluid harmlessly to the floor.

Leslie sits in Lisa’s chair, but Tobe is impatient for Cynthia to arrive, wondering aloud where she is.

Greg Gault stands by in his sinister Marsh outfit.

Steve Neill sits on the floor beside Tobe holding the controller for Lisa’s artificial hand (which is, in fact, the same as Sam’s from the bathroom scene). When asked for a demonstration, Steve pulls the control lever and the hand flexes, gripping the leather armrest tightly.

Too much, thinks Tobe. “Yeah, that’s gonna be, *that’ll* ruin it.”

So, Steve tries a more subtle movement, which Tobe finds nicely appropriate.

Out of nowhere, Greg’s adorable 4-year-old son (who he has perhaps unwisely brought along with him to the set) steps right in front of Tobe, obviously fascinated by the artificial hand.

Slightly perturbed, Tobe mumbles, “Er, it’s not safe,” and Greg snatches his boy up by the coat collar and spirits him away.

Cynthia arrives to the set and apologizes for keeping everyone waiting. Brad, in his leather jacket, sits on the floor nearby discussing the day’s schedule with Jeanne.

Tobe personally inserts the glowing syringe into the arm at the critical angle for proper penetration. He’s determined to get it right the first time. “There’s no such thing as take two!” Wielding a Makita power drill, he punctures the armrest so that the needle can bore through to the other side, yet another demonstration of Tobe’s “hands-on” approach to making movies.

Meanwhile, Cynthia shows Brad her facial expression indicating excruciating pain, unable to stifle a laugh as she does.

“It’s the giggle that makes it work,” Brad says with a straight face.

Catching me watching her through the video camera, Cynthia blows me a kiss à la Marilyn Monroe.

“Let’s shoot this Goddamn thing!” Tobe shouts.

The camera rolls. Greg wraps his black-gloved hand around the syringe as the latex fingers twitch. He presses the plunger and a thick stream of green goop oozes from the tip of the needle, quickly receding into a feeble dribble.

Tobe is clearly disappointed with the result. He scans the room looking for me, asking, “Anybody video that?”

I nod.

“Let me see it, Stan.”

On reviewing the tape, Tobe concludes that it’s just not good enough, and decides to have another go.

The needle continues to drip as they ready for another take. Once again the camera rolls. Greg squeezes the plunger, but the syringe clogs, releasing little more than an anemic drool. Deflated, Tobe concedes, “This last piece, we’ll live with it.”

They go forward with another take, but Tobe is unenthusiastic. “If it works right now, it really doesn’t matter.” However, the final take goes surprisingly well, and Tobe cuts the shot with an upbeat, “Cut! Perfect! Great!”

Paul further lightens the mood with a rallying cry of “Let’s hear it for those prop guys!” to a smattering of applause from the crew.

Apparently, there *are* second chances.

The camera is moved behind the red leather sofa to shoot Marsh's menacing rise. Cynthia sits on the couch with her back to Greg, once again standing in as Marsh. He'll crouch behind the sofa, rise to his feet engulfed in a cloud of smoke and loom threateningly above her.

It seems straightforward enough, but the timing and coordination of all the diverse elements involved (smoke, flashing lights, firelight effects, wind, the cityscape in the background, etc.) make the shot problematic.

To create the illusion of real fire, new gaffer Stephanie Blakemore manipulates a paddle with highly reflective Mylar backing, a cluster of randomly flashing lights, and an orange gel. Unfortunately, David Hayball is the latest casualty of our extended shooting schedule, having moved on to work on a documentary about 1940's movie siren Rita Hayworth. ^[27]

Stephanie, however, is an excellent replacement, an attractive young woman with an unprepossessing attitude and endless stamina.

Rehearsals are taken up mostly with technical matters: angling the lights to properly illuminate the misty fog, timing the reactive light with Greg's rise into the frame, determining the correct density of smoke. Stephanie's orange flickering light, in conjunction with the smoke, produces an effect so persuasive I actually think for a moment that there's a fire on the set.

Eventually, they're ready to roll film.

Poor Greg gets a face full of smoke on every take. I fear he might suffer a minor case of smoke inhalation. After being enveloped in one especially thick cloud, from which he's forced to step out coughing, Tobe sarcastically empathizes, "Yep, you should see Brad handle that smoke!"

Duncan, manning the mole smoker, apologizes profusely, "Greg, I'm sorry, really! I didn't mean to do that!" but Greg just brushes it off.

Impressed with Greg's unflappable endurance, Jeanne suggests, "Maybe you should be an actor, Greg."

Grinning, he grants, "If I can get *this* shit down, I dunno..." getting a chuckle from Tobe on the sidelines.

After several attempts of significantly varying quality, Tobe finally gets two takes that he likes. "All right, print *that* one and *that other good one*!"

With his aluminum man scheduled to play tomorrow, Tony really has to step up his game to have it ready to go in time. Additionally, the collapsible

dummy that stood in for Sam's final conflagration is also on the boards to be used for Marsh's similar fate.

Watching them chat quietly together, I can only conclude that Ann Marie is smitten with Robinson, although his feelings toward her are anything but clear.

It feels as though we've been shooting in Lisa's apartment forever.

They're set up now to shoot Cynthia's reaction shot to Marsh's smoldering rise from behind the couch. It's a close-up, so Greg isn't needed for the shot. Although it features most of the same complicated effects as the previous shot, most of the kinks have already been worked out, so it's anticipated that everything should proceed smoothly.

This shot marks the beginning of the film's finale. Marsh's corpse, consumed in fire, mutates into a blazing wraith as Lisa stares in shock and disbelieving horror. When Cynthia asks Tobe how big he wants her reaction to be, he tells her, "Well...don't do any stunt work!"

Bill Roberts applies a large piece of transparent tape to the back of Cynthia's hand so that the glow stick goo does not come into contact with her skin.

Kerry and Carin step in to do their last-minute touch-ups.

For some reason, co-producer Jerry Lambert is on the set, standing arms akimbo, looking very stern and authoritarian.

Red strips of tape have been hung from the overhead lamp above Lisa's glass dining table, intended to keep people from bumping their heads. As a preventative, it's not a complete success, as I've already banged my forehead twice. Maybe it's just me.

Tobe tells the electricians to really "rezzy" the lights (a term I've heard often enough on the set and have finally come to recognize as a variant of the word "resonate"). "In this particular shot, they can really go *wild* with the lights!" he adds.

"*Wild* with the lights!" Levie echoes.

Tobe also directs that the light under the cracked crystal ball "breathe" during the shot, to "hyperventilate," as he puts it.

Tobe calls, "Action!" and a curling wave of smoke creeps over the edge of the sofa. Cynthia whirls around, wide-eyed with terror. As the wind machine dissipates the cloud, the camera dollies in close and she emits a shrieking, shrill, bloodcurdling scream that lasts a lifetime. She must be in seventh heaven.

The next shot is the same setup, only now Cynthia's eyes track the motion of the sinister hybrid as it glides across the room to the octagonal wall mirror, transforming from Marsh into Sam in the process.

Tobe vividly describes the transitional creature as "a praying mantis-like thing on fire!"

Steve Brooks volunteers to hold the flickering paddle that serves as the light source and also as Cynthia's eye line. As he walks across the room with the paddle, she'll follow his trajectory with her gaze.

They roll on the first take and everything is fine, except for one little detail.

"I can see your shadow," Levie tells Steve.

A quick redirect of the 9-light (a square array of nine separate 1,000-watt quartz bulbs capable of producing blinding brightness), and they're ready to go again.

Tobe calls for action, and once again the room is crazed with flashing lights. Tobe taps Steve's shoulder as his cue. Steve slowly makes his way to the mirror as Cynthia screams and screams.

"Let's hear it for the Mylar shaker!" says Paul after the cut, leading the crew in a round of applause for Steve.

Sitting on an apple box in a corner of the room, Todd calls out, "Let's hear it for the guy back here on the apple box!"

"Okay...are we on the mirror shot with Brad?" asks Levie.

In the all-important "mirror-shot," Sam gives a chilly summation of his newly discovered purpose in life ("Earth is diseased, and I am the cure!"), and implodes into his own reflection. Tobe and Levie immediately huddle with Paul, Todd, Stephanie, and the grips.

"We'll never get into this mirror to see what he needs to see," Levie explains. "We need to get up high, and we need to tilt the mirror...!"

After laying out the shot and detailing the necessary preparations, Levie gets the "thumbs-up" from Tobe: "That's the way to do it!"

Brad emerges from his trailer^[28] and comes to the set in white face paint and wearing a full-body white leotard.

Some wiseacre cracks, "It's Marcel Marceau!" to which Brad responds by striking the "dying swan" pose from Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*.

Drawing little but amused derision from the crew, this proposed outfit for Brad's later appearance as a ghostly apparition is summarily rejected by Tobe.

Way off in the distance, Tony labors alone in his workshop. When Jeanne approaches him to admire his handiwork, she asks, "Are you the only one working on special effects?"

"Guess so," shrugs Tony. "I can't get anybody to help me, though."

Paul calls everybody upstairs for second meal.

Outside, the sun has been up for hours.

After an hour or so of rigging and planning for the "mirror shot," the clock runs out. It's decided to put it off until tomorrow, our last day.

At high noon, it's a wrap.

Thursday, April 13, 1989 - Day 32

Technically, it's early morning on Friday, April 14, 1989, officially the final day of principal photography on *Spontaneous Combustion*. Beginning at 12:30 am, it's destined to be a long one.

I don't think Tony's slept a wink in the past two days. He's been here all last night and all day today, working desperately hard to complete his three cable-driven mechanical puppets. Marsh's black trench coat is draped over one of the two wooden armatures, and the aluminum robot bears a sign admonishing, "Do Not Touch!"

His mime outfit having been disavowed, Brad is now costumed in an ashen variation of Sam's standard wardrobe. His face is grey, with sunken cheeks and dark circles under his eyes. His hair stands on end as if charged with static electricity. As I understand it, flames will be superimposed over his pale image in postproduction special effects.

Brad is concerned with the nuances of his performance while Tobe is preoccupied with the technical demands of the shot.

As they rehearse the scene, I note that much of Brad's dialogue does not appear in my copy of the script. His manifesto is now more imperious and bizarre than ever, featuring lines like, "I don't know why I exist in *this* state...I don't know why I exist *now* any more than I did before!" and "maybe I can take you back with me, back to the *core* with me...!" a clear implication that Sam's consciousness has taken refuge in the overheated bowels of the nuclear plant and is siphoning off its energy to feed his insatiable hunger for power.

Brad speaks his lines with a slight electronic timbre and the papery rasp of a lifelong cigarette smoker.

The camera is poised very close to the mirror, which has been tipped down to reflect an expansive view of Lisa's apartment. The reflection in the mirror appears to show (apart from the fallen lamp that has toppled onto the glass coffee table in an earlier sequence) a relatively neat living space. But, in actuality, the set is littered with cables, light stands, flags, filters, electrical control boxes, assorted clutter, and more, making the set a minefield to navigate. Boom man Chris Taylor has to lie flat on his back on the floor in order to mike the shot.

Although the camera remains stationary and the scene consists entirely of a single lengthy shot, there are abundant light cues, popping flashbulbs, and fire, smoke, and wind effects. The camera is locked down, meaning that the slightest jostle could ruin the shot.

"Nobody touches the dolly!" warns Levie. "Nobody moves, nobody even breathes!"

Cynthia kneels between the couch and coffee table, psyching herself up for the shot by whimpering and expelling short gasps of air.

Brad squats beneath the mirror, running the scene through his head, his face morphing from expressions of confusion to compassion to anger to resignation.

We have a fire inspector on the set for today's multiple burns, a man with a compelling Hollywood history. A kind, elderly gentleman, Pat Patterson was a young apprentice on Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind*, having not only been present during the legendary "burning of Atlanta" sequence, but additionally acting as Clark Gable's stand-in(!). He was also employed by Fleming on *The Wizard of Oz*, and was there on the Munchkinland set when Margaret Hamilton, as the Wicked Witch of the West, very nearly suffered critical burns as she disappeared beneath the floor in the wake of a huge fireball.

Pat is thoroughly professional, exceptionally good-natured, and full of stories about the glory days of the film industry—truly a pleasure to have around.

Since neither Tobe nor Levie (nor anyone else, for that matter) can get near the camera during the shot, a video assist monitor has been set up at the far side of the stage. Through the monitor, the shot looks great. Brad's translucent face large in the foreground, his profile reflected in the mirror immediately behind him. Cynthia crouching at the foot of the couch, small

and seemingly far away, lost in the looking glass. The radiating crystal ball rests at the dead center of the octagonal mirror's reflection.

It's a very weird metaphysical conceit they're trying to achieve with this shot. Conflicted, Sam threatens to trigger Lisa's inner fire, but his compassion for her overrides his passionate anger. Resigned to his own hellish fate, he vows, "I can take your fire with me! I can burn it out of you here and now!" He points one index finger directly at Lisa and with the other touches the reflection of the glowing crystal ball in the mirror. A swirling cyclone of wind and fire forms, dredging the atomic sickness from Lisa's body, ensnaring Sam, and ultimately is sucked into the mirror's infinite regress.

When they're ready to roll on the first take, Tobe reminds the crew not to move a muscle. "Everybody literally has to *freeze!*"

Levie also cautions everyone to tread lightly, even between takes.

The first attempt goes reasonably well, but there are still a lot of adjustments to be made, to the performances as well as the timing of the effects.

Tobe notices everything. Before they roll on the second take, he spots a cable in the frame that wasn't there before. "Was that there in that last take?" he asks, "Is that something new?"

Levie is livid, chiding the crew, "That's the whole idea of people not moving around the set! This thing is set like a *mousetrap!*"

Once again, everybody is exhorted to watch their every step as they come and go.

I stand with Tobe and Levie behind the video monitor during one take.

Brad is riveting to watch. With his piercing eyes and hissing voice, he makes the absurdity of the circumstances terrifyingly real, evincing Sam's barely suppressed rage, sometimes with little more than a subtle lowered eyebrow or faintly curled lip.

There's something evocative of Japanese Noh theatre in Brad's white face makeup and the deceptive simplicity of his acting. When he gazes at his reflection in the mirror, despairing at what he's become, it's a heartbreaking moment. I can tell, though, that at the end of the take he's not satisfied with himself.

Strange, because I think his performance is brilliant. [\[29\]](#)

Watching the scene unfold with the additional dialogue, I understand for the first time of the idea that Sam's SHC was in fact triggered by traces

of mercury in his father's gold watch, and not, as the script led me to suspect, the homeopathic pills that Lisa seemed to be insisting on him. While not exonerating her entirely for her complicity in Olander's plot, it does serve to make her more of an unwitting dupe than an active conspirator. Her professions of love would then appear to be sincere.

Pressed for time, Tobe decides to shoot the next few takes only in part, telling Brad, "I'll tell you what we can do, what we *must* do, is cut for the last two paragraphs."

Brad instantly agrees, "Sounds good to me."

This will make it easier to coordinate the barrage of effects at the climax of the scene.

Tobe calls an informal conference with Brad, Cynthia, and Paul to work out the timing for the final effects shot.

In order to accommodate the visual effects to be later incorporated into the shot in postproduction, Brad has to step out of the frame while the camera rolls (no easy feat, as he has to navigate around a jungle of C-stands and electrical cables) so that Sam will seem to have been vaporized when the superimposed special effects dissipate.

According to the plan, Paul will count out loud from one to eight, giving Brad ample time to clear the frame before the flashbulbs pop and the smoke gusts and the wind machine howls.

How does Burns' famous poem go? "The best-laid schemes of mice and men / often go awry."

During the first take of this new setup, as Paul is counting down, "five, six, seven," Tobe jumps up from his seat, shouting, "*Wait!* Keep it rolling!"

Oblivious, Paul continues, "eight, flash!"

The flashbulbs go off and Tobe goes ballistic. "God *damn* it! Fucking people! *Shit! Cut!*" Then, gesturing to one of the lights on the set, "The opal fell off!" (An opal is a diffusion filter typically mounted to a front of a Klieg light to soften its illumination.)

No one else noticed, and apparently no one heard or heeded Tobe's call to hold off on the effects. The entire crew bows their heads like guilty puppies. It's one of the most uncomfortable moments that I've experienced on the set.

But the problem is quickly resolved and two takes later Tobe is all smiles, extolling the efforts of the crew—"Beautiful! Great, great, great!"—and leading them in a hearty round of applause.

“Fresh cigars!” someone calls from across the set.

Tony’s metal man is nearly complete. Out of tinfoil, he’s molded a rib cage, pelvis, hands, and bones to the armature, lending it a skeletal robotic gleam.

The lights in Lisa’s apartment are dimmed. The camera is placed perilously close to the cracked crystal ball, making it appear to have risen like a twilight moon over the tiny town of Trinidad Beach. This is Lisa’s POV following Sam’s fiery expiation, staring into the depths of the crystal, transfixed by its shifting, pulsating colors as the storm subsides over the city.

Tobe is particularly pleased with the lightning effects, murmuring more or less to himself, “Very good, very good. Good lightning.”

Tony’s moment has finally come, and in a big way. Eric and I help him haul the Marsh burn dummy onto the set of Lisa’s apartment, already pre-rigged to a propane tank.

The shot is pretty straightforward. Marsh, engulfed in a blazing inferno, rises like a Phoenix from behind the couch to terrorize Lisa.

The setup goes quickly, as the set will be lit primarily by the raging flames consuming the dummy.

Tony has asked me to help operate its arms while he works the lever that raises it to a standing position, so I crowd myself back into the corner near the apartment’s front door, keeping a tight grip on the cable controls.

Cynthia sits on the couch facing the camera, with her back to us and the phone to her ear.

The camera rolls, Tobe shouts, “*Fire!*” and the thing bursts into flames.

Cynthia drops to the floor as “Marsh” rises, his body convulsing and spewing great balls of fire.

From my position in the corner, the heat is intimidating, but I continue to thrash the arms about wildly. The burn goes on and on, aggravated by the earsplitting squeal of the propane jets.

For a split second, my life passes before my eyes. Then, thankfully, Tobe yells, “*Cut it!*” and pyrotechnician Duncan Puett rushes in to extinguish the flames.

What remains of the dummy is a steaming, decimated wreck.

I overhear Levie telling Tobe, “Now, when I [boomed] up, I saw someone moving back there, so I went back down.” It’s reasonable to assume that what Levie saw was probably me flinching from the heat.

Tobe is extremely pleased with the effect. “All right, I got some good shit here, some good moments!”

As exhilarating as that was, it’s only the beginning. Tony carts in the robotic aluminum creature. Now spray-painted black, it looks to me like an enormous alien insect. The body is stuffed with flash paper and rigged with a remote igniter. Mounted on a wheeled plywood platform, it requires four operators to make it work. Eric and Richard McGuire operate the arms while I manipulate the head and Tony guides it across the floor.

We’re ready to roll after one quick rehearsal.

Tobe has us start the articulation even before the camera rolls.

Paul calls out, “Okay, let’s roll please!”

“Everything is set,” says Tobe. “And start the move, *ignition!*” A spark ignites the flash paper, which all goes up in one sudden burst of flame. As the fire ebbs, Tobe calls out, “More articulation!” The arms lash out and the still-blazing head twitches and bobs as we fervently tug at the controls.

When the camera cuts, Tony imprudently tries to put out the fire as if he were blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, sending a swarm of hot embers fluttering into the air. “God *damn* it!” he yelps, stepping out of the way to let Duncan do his job.

Paul suffers a minor burn, not from Tony’s ill-advised attempt at dousing the flames, but instead as the result of Duncan’s scattering the embers with misdirected high-pressure blasts from his fire extinguisher.

But there’s still more to come. The skeletal armature is now clothed preposterously in a white dress shirt and slacks, a new latex face is pulled over its head like a Halloween mask, and a 1,000-watt bulb is lodged into its sternum.

Performing precisely the same action as the previous shot, the brilliant glow from within its chest is eerie, but the fire is considerably less intense.

Also, some of the mechanics fail, leaving one arm dangling limply to its side at the finish.

As visual effects supervisor Steve Brooks explains it to me, these two shots will be combined in postproduction and visually enhanced to depict the transmutation of Marsh’s suppurating corpse into Sam’s luminous phantasm.

The polyester clothing has melted to the framework of the artificial man, making it look ironically like the incinerated cadaver of an unfortunate ice cream vendor.

Believing that this shot marks the end of the night's shooting, fire inspector Pat Patterson hops into his car and drives off. Almost immediately noting his absence, Paul charges Sean to chase him down and bring him back to the stage.

When they return a few minutes later, Pat emerges from his vehicle with a shrug and a sheepish grin. It's a relief, as we can't continue without a representative of the fire department present. After all, one very important sequence remains to be shot.

Finally, the cops will fry.

Outside, the sky is dark, but compared to the frigid cold in Malibu, it's a rather balmy night. The day has dragged on for over eighteen hours. Eric brushes it off as if it's nothing, telling me that the last day of shooting on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* was twenty-six hours long, and took place in the sweltering heat of Texas in July.

At the back of Stage 4, a phone booth is erected, as well as a park bench, newspaper dispenser, and assorted shrubbery.

Sam's cherry-red Studebaker rests at the curb, and two police patrol cars are parked at clumsy angles as if they've hastily converged on the scene.

This is the third location used as the site of Sam's hysterical telephone call to Lisa and its deadly outcome.

Steve Brooks has been promoted from hospital orderly to officer of the law. Though he looks authentic in his neatly pressed uniform, his boyishness suggests that he must be the youngest officer on the force.

In his joint role as still photographer and special effects assistant, Eric is thoroughly caught up in preparations for the burn. He and Tony conscientiously check over all of the dummy's cable connections, making sure that all the limbs are flexible and loose.

In the first shot, Brad will speed away from the scene in the Studebaker, leaving behind the ill-fated cop (previously played by Greg Gault) to erupt in flames.

Tobe and Brad walk the path the car will take. Brad is in his swollen eye makeup, courtesy of a quick application by Steve Neill.

The first dummy cop is propped in front of a police car with its control mechanism secreted behind the vehicle. Two cameras with differing lenses are mounted on tripods at a safe distance from the set.

The entire crew, whether directly involved in the shot or not, has turned out to watch. Even Cynthia, whose been released from the film, hangs around to see the fireworks.

Showing his film savvy, Brad asks Tobe the focal lengths of the lenses on the two cameras, wondering whether he'll be seen to be sweating in the shot. Tobe tells him not to worry about it, but jokes, "You could put some of that glow stuff in your mouth!"

The dummy starts to sway before the cameras roll.

Paul shouts, "Okay, start the smoke!" and the fake cop is enveloped in a steaming cloud.

"Action, Brad!" calls Paul, sending the Studebaker peeling away from the scene.

Patrolman Steve leaps out of his cruiser and runs to assist his distressed partner, who suddenly explodes, burning alive in a rapidly increasing blanket of flame. Steve draws his weapon and fires two shots at Sam's escaping vehicle but is nearly knocked off his feet by the heat from the flames engulfing his fellow officer.

"*Cuuuut!*" Tobe yells over the whine of the propane.

"That's a cut, that's a cut!" Paul echoes. "Put it out! Put it out!"

"*Beautiful!*" Tobe enthuses, "That's beautiful!"

The crowd loves it, whooping and clapping and stomping their feet.

Tobe is beside himself with elation, wondering aloud, "Did I say 'cut'?"

Now it's Steve's turn to go up in flames, or at least his artificial stand-in.

Tony and Eric cart out the second dummy and prep it for the shot. Eric uses spray adhesive to coat its aluminum foil cranium with copious strips of flash paper.

Once again, I've been enlisted as an operator. While Eric articulates the first dummy, Tony and I will manipulate the second.

It's near the end of an unbelievably long day, but I detect no trace of fatigue from the crew. Instead, they seem energized in anticipation of the big burn.

Brad wends his way through the crowd, talking to no one, seemingly lost in thought.

This last shot is also a two-camera setup. One is directed at the burning cops in the distance, the other is focused relatively close on Brad, looking

through the Studebaker's windshield with the blazing policemen in the background.

Braced behind the wheel, Brad sweats and hyperventilates. Just before they roll, he waves the crew out of the path of the car.

Chris scrunches into the floorboards of the passenger seat to record Brad's savage line, "*Burn*, you bastard!"

I'm crouched out of view, hidden from sight behind the phone booth.

The first dummy is already burning when the cameras roll. Tobe calls "*Fire!*" and Guy ignites the second cop.

The first cop crumbles of its own accord into a festering heap of ashes.

A huge fireball engulfs the other dummy. The flames leap higher and higher, wailing like a banshee, growing brighter and brighter until the pitiful writhing figure is fully consumed by the blaze and collapses finally into an all-embracing phosphorous bonfire of silver and white light.

It's as fitting an end as I can possibly imagine.

Saturday, April 15, 1989

Perhaps I spoke too soon. Tobe has somehow secured a few extra hours of stage time to shoot some of the film's missing pieces. A skeleton crew is assembled in Stage 4 to assist.

Alone and forlorn, the bomb has been shunted aside in a corner of the stage for weeks now. Finally, it gets its moment in the sun, literally. Richard McGuire has done a magnificent job in creating an incendiary device that is at once imposing and archaic, the primitive weaponry of the 1950s masquerading as sophisticated technology. Vaguely reminiscent of "Fat Man," the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan in August 1945, but with none of its sleekness or elegance, our bomb instead seems to have been designed by committee and cobbled together from disparate parts. A compendium of rivets and bolts, vacuum tubes and a web of tangled wires, it much more closely resembles the Trinity prototype, "The Gadget," as it was nicknamed, the first nuclear device detonated at the White Sands Proving Grounds in Socorro, New Mexico three weeks earlier, in July 1945. Contained in a weathered, corrugated lead enclosure ostensibly situated on a tower 100 feet above ground, its corroded appearance instills no confidence in its reliability. Stenciled across it in large, red letters is the legend, "SAMSON."

Stephanie has lit the set beautifully: moody and dark, with a broad slash of light falling across the stenciled lettering. A spinning red light turns above the bomb, flashing a lazy warning. Pale yellow light spills from the ancient, rusted lighting fixtures. Heavy and bleak, portending doom, it looks as though it might collapse under its own weight at any second.

In a shot intended to dramatically reveal the explosive device in the moments before detonation, Levie's camera starts low, below the tailfins of the contraption, then smoothly moves diagonally upward, rising high as it reaches its snub-nosed tip.

Dana allows Brian to pull focus for the shot, and he performs this difficult task admirably. They perform the same action several times.

On one take, after the move, Tobe quietly muses, “Now, if you could just go back the other direction...” and they execute the same movement in reverse. After which, Tobe suggests, “Let’s do one where we just kind of ‘jetpack’ it!”

It isn’t long before both Tobe and Levie agree that they have the speed and fluid motion that they want. When they’re satisfied, they move on to a visually more straightforward, but nevertheless more complicated shot.

Scene 3: is the detonation a misfire? The bomb shudders and spews scalding blasts of steam as the bright morning light from the rising sun illuminates its hulking ugliness from below.

The camera starts close on the “SAMSON” logo, then slowly dollies back and booms down as the bomb jitters and smokes and the dawn breaks underneath.

As the prop guys shake the bomb, a loose bolt in the shadows sputters up and down, giving the impression of a malfunctioning piston—a happy accident and an unintended bonus.

Eric and I work the dimmer switches for the glow of the sunrise.

Squatting down in front of the set, Tobe personally mans the mole smoker, pumping huge clouds of smoke beneath the trembling behemoth.

At the end of one take, after Tobe asks him how it looked, Levie replies, “I think I saw *you*!”

“No shit?” Tobe says with a grin.

A large swath of duvetyne velour fabric is hung in one corner of the stage, encircling the Studebaker in darkness.

Brad sits behind the wheel while Steve Neill touches up his “cauterized eyeball” makeup, gathering his strength to shoot a very long, demanding monologue in which Sam rants and raves and works himself into a seething frenzy en route to his fatal confrontation with Olander.

The technique being used is known as the “poor man’s process,” a repudiation of the much more expensive and generally unconvincing “process shots” used in films of the ’50s and ’60s, in which a traveling background is projected onto a screen behind a stationary vehicle. The approach is relatively simple. Irregular shifting lights, occasional bursts of smoke, and a slight jiggle of the car all collude to create the illusion of movement down a dark highway. In addition, a 2x2 wooden bar has been

painted black and strung with lights and is passed above the auto at random intervals, as if passing streetlights are being reflecting in the windshield. Brad is otherwise only dimly lit by the pale green light from the radio dial.

Since the crew is short, I'm assigned to operate one of the lights shining into the car, erratically flashing into the rear side-view mirror and reflecting directly onto Brad's face. I'm offered a pair of thick gloves as protection from the heat of the lamp, but naively refuse. However, it isn't long before I'm begging to have them back.

In rehearsals, communication is poor at first. Tobe's headset isn't working, and he mutters in frustration, "Can't hear a Goddamn thing!"

Brad isn't happy either, evidently feeling ignored in deference to technical issues, and he isn't entirely wrong. During the first run-through, nobody, including Tobe, seems to be paying the least bit of attention to him.

The camera is locked down on a medium shot of Brad through the windshield of the car.

They roll on the first take and Brad begins at a startlingly high pitch, "They killed my mother and father like *test monkeys*!"

The speech takes a peculiar turn when Sam overhears a cheery radio voice saying, "this week at fifty percent off! This sale won't last forever..."

Inspired by the insipid advertisement, he riffs on the concept of percentages. "Fifty? Yeah, *fifty percent*! If I reduce the population fifty percent, then the *remaining* fifty percent will be in mass planetary shock! Probably create a new industry disposing of the bones and teeth...!" His lunatic fervor rises exponentially, culminating finally in this explosive outburst, "I am the *son of the first thermonuclear hydrogen bomb*! I am the *FIRE FROM HEAVEN*!"

Isolated inside the car and surrounded by darkness, Brad's performance is all the more remarkable. He seems to feed off the frustrations caused by the numerous delays and technical problems, tapping into his own irritation and channeling it into Sam's anger.

They shoot the entire speech over and over again, and with each subsequent take Brad grows more agitated.

On a personal note, I'm a little bummed because a favorite line in the dialogue, "Does that *cunt* Rachel know?" has been changed to read, "that *bitch* Rachel..." I think that the original line is more indicative of Sam's uncontrollable rage, but no one is asking my opinion.

Brad is pushed to the brink, at the limits of his endurance. At one point, he goes up on his lines, something he hasn't done in all the prior weeks of shooting. At the end of one especially trying take, when it becomes evident that they'll have to go again because of a lighting glitch, he silently mouths, "Shit!"

But all of the annoyance and frustration, all the irritation and impatience, pay off in the end.

When, at the end of the last take, Brad utters Sam's triumphant cry in defiance of Olander's corrupt plot, "my surrogate father, *my atom-smashing father*, WE'LL DIE *TOGETHER!*" Tobe looks over to Levie and quietly asks, "Okay?"

Levie brings everything to a close with two simple words: "Good here!"

Well, almost everything. One last shot remains.

The seafoam green bathtub from Lisa's apartment stands alone at the center of the stage. Steve Neill brings in Sam's overworked prosthetic arm, its volcanic wound now rigged to emanate a bright yellow glow.

The shot is Sam's POV as, even submerged under water, bursts of flame continue to spurt from his gaping arm wound.

Steve Brooks assumes his duties as second unit director and the camera is operated by a mysterious guest director of photography.

The tub is filled with water and dry ice. Steve lowers the arm into the churning water, bubbling and boiling like a witch's cauldron. The camera zooms in close, descending into an abstract realm of quivering molecules and subatomic particles.

They roll film until the camera is literally wrenched from their hands and carted away by representatives of Panavision.

So, this is how it ends. Not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with a gurgle.

PICK-UPS *RAPID FIRE*

Saturday, May 20, 1989 - Day 1

John Dykstra founded Apogee, Inc. in 1978, following the tremendous success of George Lucas' *Star Wars*, on which he was supervisor of special photographic effects. Dykstra was also part of Tobe's visual effects team on his giddy science fiction throwback, *Lifeforce*. Listed as a special effects consultant on *Spontaneous Combustion*, he's been gracious enough to make his modest Van Nuys soundstage available to us to shoot a series of "inserts," or "pick-ups"—brief cutaway shots of props or bits of business essential to the film's narrative and that are quite literally "inserted" into the film between other shots.

Arriving at 11:00 am, it's a pleasure for Eric and I to see the familiar faces of co-producer Jerry Lambert, UPM Sanford Hampton, transportation captain "Buffalo" Bob Lang, makeup man Bill Miller-Jones, and 2nd AC Brian Bernstein, all milling about talking. It's been over a month since we've all seen one another, and it's great to have a moment to catch up.

Before long, director of photography Levie Isaacks shows up with 1st assistant cameraman Dana Gonzales in tow. Not far behind are prop master Frank Bertolino and carpenter Lance Simco. Still no sign of Tobe, though.

Production secretary Lisa Van Cott gives me a shot list for today and tomorrow, a confirmation of the rumor that we'll be working the entire weekend. Gaffer Stephanie Blakemore arrives, throws a quick wave, and dashes onto the set. All of today's shots are silent, so we have no expectation of seeing either sound mixer Craig Felberg or boom operator Chris Taylor. There are also several new faces on the set, grips du jour who I have yet to meet.

Carin Hooper calls the stage, explaining to Jerry Lambert that she and Tobe are running late, “so go ahead and shoot the first shot!”

Meanwhile, I overhear production accountant Marc Kunis mention something about a videotape of the film’s first assembly, which definitely piques my curiosity.

Inside, the camera sits in a pool of light surrounded by darkness. Since lighting double Adriano DeFreitas has yet to arrive, Brian is standing in for the stand-in. In this shot, Brian Bell examines his gold watch just prior to strapping in for the bomb blast.

It occurs to me that here we have Brian Bernstein playing Brian Bremer playing Brian Bell.

That’s odd.

Adriano arrives to the stage just a few minutes later, and immediately suits up in Brian’s olive-green coveralls. Today, he’s much more than a lighting double—he’s a full-fledged on camera hand model.

Hovering over Adriano’s shoulder, the camera is mounted high on a dolly that might charitably be called “vintage.” The slatted floor of the bomb shelter, which will be far out of focus in this shot, is replicated using strips of electrical tape stretched over a piece of white-painted plywood.

Paul Moen^[30] has moved on to work as 1st AD on Warren Beatty’s *Dick Tracy*, so Sanford acts as assistant director. However, with Tobe still absent, co-producer Jerry Lambert is the authority figure on the set. He assigns Lisa to determine at what time to set the watch for the shot. Hell, I could have told him that. The detonation of the bomb is scheduled for sunup at 6:00 am, and the winding of the watch takes place mere moments before the countdown begins, so I’d say roughly 5:58 am.

When Lisa returns, she confirms my estimate to the minute.

Tobe and Carin walk onto the set, looking fresh and happy. Tobe wears a white T-shirt emblazoned with the film’s logo in large black letters. He thanks everyone for coming and gets straight to work.

As he sets the time, Frank discovers that the second hand on the prop watch doesn’t function. Fortunately, in anticipation of just this eventuality, Carin has brought along her own grandfather’s authentic, 14-carat gold antique watch. Adriano is advised to handle it with extreme care.

Tobe and Levie (both wearing the same promotional T-shirt for the film, I note) look through a slide viewer at a 35mm film frame of the scene in

order to match the lighting, angle, and details of the shot to its original specifications.

At 12:30 pm, Sanford quiets the stage for the first rehearsal. Tobe watches through the viewfinder as Adriano pops open the watch, showing its face to the camera, winds it, and clicks it closed. Since his hands are so large in the frame, Adriano has to keep his movements small and graceful. Any motion too big or abrupt simply won't read on film. Two takes and out.

Frank is way ahead of Sanford, having his props at the ready before they're even called for. The next setup features the record player from the bomb shelter and a metal box containing two syringes. Perhaps appropriately enough, the metal box resembles a silver cigar case from the period. Tobe delicately lines the box with cotton padding and carefully places the hypodermic needles inversely into the case. The camera is situated directly above the metal container. Adriano, with Brian's wedding ring on his finger, opens the case and removes one syringe, hands it to one of the new guys off camera, then takes the other one for himself. After some minor adjustments, they get the shot in one easy take.

It's interesting how the camera essentially never moves. Instead, all the props and set decoration are flown in. It's also intriguing to see so many eyes focused on one tiny spot for a brief, intense moment, and then watch as they disperse into the shadows once the shot has ended.

In another part of the stage, Steve Brooks meets with Bill Miller-Jones to prepare a foam latex hand for a later insert in which Sam, at the gate of Olander's mansion, is shot clean through the hand by a bullet from the sentry's gun. A hole is punctured in the hand and filled with clay putty. Then, an explosive squib with a tiny blood pack is attached to the back of the hand with adhesive tape.

Marc brings out a VHS tape of a rough cut of the film.

Tobe and Levie watch a playback of the footage pertaining to the next shot, with which, it turns out, I am unexpectedly involved. Eric has volunteered my hands as stand-in for Sam's in the scenes that prefigure the inexplicable growth of his birthmark.

The next pick-up is not only part of the film's transition from the past to the present but is also immediately precedes the very first shot of principal photography on the auditorium stage of John Marshall High nearly two months ago.

I don Sam's beige shirt and navy-blue blazer while Bill applies Sam's circular birthmark to the back of my right hand.

Frank hands me an acting edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the same one that Brad held over his head to protect him from falling glitter on the first day of the shoot.

Tobe demonstrates for me how to hold the book above my head and to find the correct angle relative to the camera, reiterating the need to remain as still as possible and to make my movements slow and deliberate, made all the more necessary with the decision to roll at thirty-six frames per second, slowing down the image by half.

As Levie is explaining the shot to me, Tobe interjects, "Well, wait until you're zoomed out, since we're going in slow-mo, it should be a, you know, kind of a weird 'where are we?' kind of thing, 'cause we zoomed *into* the baby's hand and we're coming *out* of this...the thing is, wait until you're out, just a little bit, wait until you're out at the end of the zoom."

"Just listen to him!" Levie grunts.

Tobe instructs Levie to cue me at the end of the zoom, but I tell them that there's no need, as I can see the indicator on the camera from where I'm standing and can take my cue from that. They both seem pleased with my initiative.

One of the grips brings me a C-stand with an arm extension to set my elbow on and help me to hold my hand steady.

When Levie checks my position through the viewfinder, he tells me, "That is just perfect!" but cautions, "Stan, you can't even move a quarter of an inch or you'll be out of frame!"

Franks sits on the top rung of a nearby ladder, poised to sprinkle glitter onto me from a Styrofoam cup attached to the end of a pole. On our first take, he pours far too much, sending hundreds of tiny bright flares into the lens. Levie cuts the roll before I have a chance to move.

The next two takes go swimmingly though, and we're done in three.

As much fun as it is, the task turns out to be much more exacting than I imagined it would be. Also, it's nerve-wracking to be the center of so much concentrated attention.

Jerry keeps in near-constant phone contact with editor David Kern to ensure that the film's continuity is strictly adhered to.

The latex hand is brought to the set and attached to a C-stand with a metal clamp, held high as if it's swearing an oath.

A few potted pine trees (which Levie refers to as “the Christmas trees”) stand in the background to simulate the greenery on Olander’s property.

When Tobe gets his first look at the hand, with its fingertips flexed unnaturally inward as if rigor mortis has set in, he remarks, “Now, what am I seeing, anyway?”

Sanford flippantly orders, “Finger adjustment!”

Tobe then spends a great deal of time bending the hand’s flexible digits into the proper attitude, like a child playing with a lump of Silly Putty.

When the fingers are properly adjusted and Levie is satisfied with the lighting, Sanford calls out with mock officiousness, “Mr. Hooper, to the lens please!”

“Rolling,” says Tobe. “Let me just try this a couple of times. Get ready, Terry!”

“Ready!” answers Terry, our new pyro effects guy.

Tobe gives the cue, “And...*now!*”

The squib goes off, blasting a hole in the hand the size of a quarter as a spray of red mist dissipates into the air.

The hand is quickly re-puttied and readied for a second take.

Looking through the viewfinder, Tobe admires the shot. “It sure looks good through the lens!” but can’t resist making one final adjustment to the fingertips.

When the squib blows this time, dollops of blood splatter out the back of the hand as if somebody spilled their drink. “Give it a triple!” says Tobe, which makes the others laugh but only confuses me.

In Sam’s jacket, shirt, and trousers, with the soiled green towel wrapped around his arm, Adriano sits with the camera practically resting on his shoulder. The shot is Sam’s POV of the gold watch as he waits in Marsh’s examination room for Cagney’s return.

Sitting on the dolly with Dr. Pepper and cigar in hand, Tobe quietly inquires, “Is there goop on his hands?”

Levie has a concern, pointing out that the back of Adriano’s hand is noticeably hairier than Brad’s.

Tobe calls Bill Miller-Jones over, asking, “Bill, is there anything you can do to that hair, uh, aside from shaving it?”

Oblivious, Bill answers, “I could put the wig on him.”

“No, no, on his *arm* hair!” chuckles Tobe.

After one false start when Levie points out that the antique timepiece is set incorrectly, they get the shot in one long, continuous take, having Adriano open and close the watch cover over and over again.

Sanford calls for a cut and asks Levie, "How'd you like it?"

"I loved it," says Levie.

"He loved it!" trumpets Sanford, "Now we can eat lunch!"

Before we eat, Tobe, Eric and I take a tour of Apogee, marveling at the sophisticated photographic equipment and the models and maquettes from *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, *Firefox*, and *Lifeforce*, among many others.

We break for a meal at about 5:00 pm. Behind the facilities, there are barbequed steaks and picnic tables and a party atmosphere. Everybody's joking and laughing and having a great time.

Production accountant Marc Kunis tells us about his recent visit to Universal Studios' new *Earthquake* attraction, saying it was "terrific!"

Jerry Lambert admits to having played the Palomino Club about ten years ago in a disco band(!) called either "Band o' Gold" or "Twenty Grand."

When asked about his upcoming gig in France and the prospects of working with a French film crew, Sanford responds in his typically impertinent way, "I'm bringin' in my whole fucking crew! I'm not *even* fucking around with a bunch of fucking *froggies*, man!" which sets the table on a roar.

We're back from lunch at 6:00 pm and immediately set to work.

Once again in Sam's wardrobe, Adriano leans over a desktop and flips through multicolored file folders for the scene in which Sam rummages through Marsh's desk. The prop department has filled the folders with detailed documents and various pictures of Sam, Lisa, and Jennifer, as well as a few weathered photographs of Sam's parents.

Adriano is a bit laconic in his efforts and Levie encourages him to speed up with these kind words: "Hurry! *Hurry*, God damn it!"

In the background, Levie's infant daughter can be heard giggling and cooing. She's here to be Baby David's hand double. Bill is applying a miniature version of Sam's birthmark to her tiny hand.

A broad swath of sky-blue carpet from Marsh's office is brought in and rolled out onto the stage floor.

In this segment, when Cagney abruptly interrupts his snooping, Sam lets the files fall from his hands. Lance is designated to spill the files to the carpet in a convincingly haphazard way, making certain that photographs can be read by the camera. (I can't help but notice that Lance is also wearing one of the film's promotional T-shirts. Hmm, now where can I get *me* one of those?) It's really a case of trial and error rather than any kind of precision work.

When Sanford approaches and asks, "How's it goin', Holmes?" Levie's reply couldn't be more to the point.

"It ain't easy tryin' to get this shit to work!"

Rehearsing the shot, Lance manages to execute three near-perfect tosses, prompting Levie to say, "God *damn*, I wish we woulda' been rollin'!"

Of course, the minute the camera rolls, the papers and photos fall every which way.

Sanford sardonically sums it up, "Uh, that was *dreadful*. Cut!"

Bill Miller-Jones applies a bloody bullet wound to Adriano's hand for the upcoming insert, in which Sam stands beneath the chandelier in Olander's foyer as his father's gold watch chimes midnight.

Levie's wife Dana brings their adorable daughter over to the camera in a plastic bassinette. To keep her happy and settled, Dana makes funny faces and silly noises and talks gibberish.

The little girl is picture perfect. They get the shot, a zoom into the baby's birthmark, in two quick takes.

Bathed in the eerie blue moonlight from Olander's garish entryway, Adriano stands on a large section of the mansion's checkerboard flooring. In this penultimate moment of the film, as Sam's watch chimes midnight, he pops it open one last time before being consumed in flames. It's vitally important that the camera be able to read the dial clearly, so Adriano struggles to keep his hand as steady as is humanly possible.

Just before they roll, Frank double-checks the watch to make sure that it's set correctly to 11:59.

Manipulating the watch in such a restricted space is clumsy enough, but the blood from the bullet wound makes it slippery and difficult for Adriano to get a good solid grip. It requires many, many long takes to find the shot.

Finally, when Levie is satisfied and the shot is in the can, Adriano breathes a sigh of relief.

A large stucco wall is flown onto the set with the hanging phone from Marsh's examination room attached.

In the scene, Sam makes a frantic phone call, desperately trying to get in touch with Nina, who had claimed to know his parents on Dr. Persons' radio show. Reaching the switchboard, he jots her contact information on the wall.

Before they roll, Levie has one request. "Uh, let's steady up this damn set, man! This sumbitch is swimmin'!"

In truth, the wall is wavering a bit. Stephanie calls for a few sandbags and the problem is resolved in a matter of seconds.

In a pleasant about-face from the last setup, Adriano gets the shot in one take.

Frank breathlessly runs up to Lance, saying with mock urgency, "*Lance!* We gotta reconstruct tiny town right here, *right now!*"

The next setup requires no actors, just a video playback of John Landis' smiling face on the screen of the examination room's wall-mounted TV set. The only complication is in having to adjust the camera's standard frame rate of 24fps (frames per second) to the video standard of 30fps in order to eliminate any "rolling" artifact on the video screen. One and done.

Once again, I'm called to the plate to act as Brad's hand double. I still have Sam's birthmark on my hand and Bill has appended a bandage to my index finger.

This shot is arguably more complicated than my previous exercise and undeniably more important. Having arrived home from school, Sam detaches an envelope from the inside lid of the mysterious red hatbox. Upon opening the envelope, he discovers a handwritten card that reads, "For my son...on the day of his birth. May your life always be a merry-go-round"—the original gift card that accompanied Sam/David's first birthday present.

Tobe demonstrates the action for me, deftly peeling the envelope from the box lid, opening it, removing the card and revealing the inscription to the camera. Levie, who's been watching it all through the camera lens, says matter-of-factly, "That was perfect." So, the pressure is on.

"Why don't you look through the lens real quick?" Tobe invites me as he again runs through the action.

His intuitive grasp of what the camera sees is phenomenal. He never looks up, never checks the angle, and yet he's right on the money every time. His instructions can be boiled down to "keep it simple," and "just feel

it.” But the most invaluable advice he gives me is purely technical, to “work everything a little lower than feels natural.”

The sequence is actually divided into two shots: removing the envelope and revealing the card. Even while holding a telephone receiver in the crook of my neck, the first shot goes smoothly, and we move quickly on to the second.

Before we roll, though, Levie firmly insists that I clean my fingernails, which I have to admit are a bit filthy.

Tobe helpfully talks me through the action, whispering the word “mystery” to me as I turn the card to reveal the inscription. Despite my nervousness and tendency to drift in the frame, Tobe calls for a print on the third take. He seems pleased, but I feel as if I never quite got it right.

And that’s a wrap for the day at about 11:00 pm.

Afterwards, Tobe and I have a nice chat about the inherent difficulty of “acting” in pick-ups. He says that while he was directing me, he was thinking, “How can I tell Stan in a few words what’s taken me twenty years to learn?”

Sunday, May 21, 1989 - Day 2

Road trip! Eric and I arrive at Apogee at 3:00 pm, just in time to get back into the car and leave. The first part of the day is dedicated to reconnaissance and guerilla filmmaking.

We all depart in a ragged convoy. Adriano drives the Studebaker, with Levie beside him in the passenger seat and Dana in the back holding the camera. Jerry drives his own mustard-colored Chevy van with Sanford riding shotgun and Brian, wardrobe supervisor Julia Gombert, Bill Miller-Jones, the grips, and the camera equipment squeezed into the back. Frank and “Buffalo” Bob ride along in a flatbed truck, which hauls the roadside sign bearing the corporate logo of the Trinidad Beach nuclear plant. Finally, Eric and I in his silver El Camino bring up the rear.

The first shot requires a narrow, isolated road adjacent to a power plant or similar facility. We caravan to a nearby location, which Jerry had scouted a few weeks ago. It becomes quickly obvious to all concerned that the surroundings don’t suit the needs of the shot. Fortunately, Levie has an alternative in mind. At his direction, we hop back into the vehicles and head south to Valencia.

The tape deck blares The Platter's *Atomic Telephone* as Eric and I pull up to a long stretch of unincorporated road in the shadow of a power generating station. Levie, Sanford, and Frank are already out of their cars and scoping out the location. They unanimously agree that this is definitely the place.

Commenting on the whole safari experience, Brian exclaims, "It's just like summer camp!"

Although the power plant sign looks heavy and solid, it's actually quite lightweight and flimsy. The day is exceptionally windy, and the sign teeters unsteadily as Frank and the grips set it up by the side of the road.

"No, a little more to the left so we can see all *that* shit!" Levie shouts, gesturing at the electrical towers in the background.

"All right!" Sanford crows, "We want to see the *shit*, guys!"

I can't help but notice Jerry's matching ensemble of pink polo shirt, tennis shorts, and sneakers. Also, I enviously observe that several members of the crew are wearing *Spontaneous Combustion* T-shirts.

We have no permits, so the shot is thankfully a simple one. The camera focuses on the sign as Adriano passes by in the Studebaker, then pans as it speeds off into the distance. For atmosphere, Eric drives his El Camino toward us from the other direction. Within minutes, the sign is loaded up and we're on the road to Hollywood.

On the freeway, quite a few drivers gawk at the sight of the cherry-red 1950 Studebaker Champion coupe, a classic vintage automobile that rarely hits the road.

The Rodeo in Hollywood is a striking, three-story modernist apartment building painted in pale pastel shades of pink and green. With its huge, evocative central obelisk, it's the ideal location for the exterior of Lisa's residence.

Once again, there are no permits, so Levie urges us to be circumspect and not draw undue attention to ourselves.

Brian mounts the camera on the tripod and sets up across the street. Since it's still only late afternoon and the shot takes place after twilight, Levie must "stop down" the camera to shoot the scene day for night. Other than that, the shot is a cruise. Levie pans down from the roof of the building to the canopied entryway as Adriano, in his fright wig and wardrobe, trundles up to the door.

“That’s a cut!” says Levie, and we all slip away, trying our best to appear inconspicuous.

Levie, Brian, and Dana hop in the back of Eric’s El Camino for the short ride to the next location. North Highland Avenue, with its grassy, tree-lined medians and trendy bungalows, is an eminently suitable surrogate for the fictional community of Trinidad Beach.

The setup couldn’t be simpler: the camera “on sticks” faces south and pans as the Studebaker speeds past, then faces north and repeats the shot as the car approaches from another direction. After a few easy passes, Hollywood is just a reflection in our rearview mirrors.

After a stomach-churning lunch of fast-food burgers and fries, we return to Apogee for the remainder of the day. It appears that Tobe has taken the day off and entrusted the whole enterprise to Levie.

Happily, the moment we return, Lisa presents me with my very own *Spontaneous Combustion* T-shirt.

Frank and the grips have erected two yellow walls duplicating one corner of Peggy’s hospital room. A wooden frame slatted with strips of electrical tape serves as the room’s venetian blinds, and Stephanie has rigged a powerful light behind them to replicate the streaming rays of the morning sun.

On a white bureau in the corner, blackened flowers wilt above the desiccated ruin of the once-gleaming toy carousel.

This shot is a complement to the original “beauty shot” of the carousel, but instead of appearing bright and shining new, it’s shrouded in smoke and melted away by the searing heat of Brian and Peggy’s tragic immolation. As the firelights flicker and die, the carousel horses slowly and inscrutably continue to spin.

After one long take in which the smoke and light levels change constantly, Levie has plenty of footage in the can and ends the roll.

Sanford sends me to Bill to have Sam’s birthmark applied, explaining that I’m going to be needed in a few upcoming shots. That is, my hands will be needed.

When Sam disintegrates into a raging ball of flame, all that remains is a heap of ashes and a few insignificant possessions: wallet, credit cards, keys, and, of course, his father’s gold watch. This pitiful collection of artifacts is piled onto Olander’s checkerboard floor and washed in cool blue lighting.

A blast of smoke and a little reactive light and this shot is another one for the books.

Moving swiftly along, Frank spreads out the same items out on a tin hospital tray. When Marsh accosts Lisa in the hospital corridor, he gestures to the tray and reproaches her, “See? *That’s* all that’s left of your boyfriend!”

With no actors, no camera movement, and no lighting effects, Levie and the crew make quick work of it.

I’m up next.

In this shot, after finding the gift that Jennifer covertly left behind, Sam discovers the gold watch inside.

The Studebaker is now conveniently parked inside the stage. I put on Sam’s wardrobe and get behind the wheel. Beside me on the seat sits the red hatbox. With the camera practically on my shoulder, I need to hold my chin up high to keep my face out of the frame.

Before we begin, I show Levie my sparkling clean fingernails, which makes him laugh.

When Levie rolls the camera, I open the box, taking note of the envelope taped to the inside of the lid. I remove the watch, pop it open, hold it up to the camera, and wind it. I’m much more confident than yesterday and actually feel that I’m getting the hang of it. I start to drift from the frame and Levie hisses, “You’re fuckin’...” but there’s no need for him to complete the thought, as I receive his meaning loud and clear.

My final shot is simply a close-up on my hand turning the Studebaker’s radio dial. It hardly seems worth mentioning, but without it, the film editors would have nothing to cut away to when Sam tunes in to Dr. Person’s radio show.

I hadn’t realized that Tony was here, lurking in the shadows and preparing for the last, most difficult shot of the night.

While on the telephone with Lisa, Sam’s eye blasts out and he develops the strange ability to “see” via the phone lines. During principal photography, the eye in the phone was simulated using a holographic image. Here, Tony has outdone himself. His melted, modified telephone receiver harbors a repugnant, unblinking eyeball staring out from inside the earpiece. Not only that, but Tony can manipulate the eye to dart frantically about, seeming to scrutinize everything in sight. I find it extremely disturbing.

Featuring smoke, melting plastic, glowing green goo, as well as the unnerving eyeball in the telephone, this shot poses some significant challenges.

In a satisfying bit of happenstance, Lisa's hand has been cast as Lisa's hand.

Compared to most of the other pick-ups this weekend, this shot in particular requires a great deal of planning, preparation, and patience.

A large piece of pink carpeting is rolled out onto the stage floor and Frank places Lisa's glass coffee table on it. (Once again, Frank's organizational skills impress me. He's always at least one step ahead of the game.) A small, directional key light illuminates the eyeball.

In contrast to Guy Faria's unreliable compressor, Eric instead uses on a decidedly primitive technique: he puffs on a cigarette and blows smoke through a tube.

Twisting her body to accommodate the angle of the camera, Lisa finds herself in a rather awkward position. "This is a natural pose," she says dryly. Welcome to show biz.

When asked whether she can see the eyeball moving inside the phone, she flatly intones, "Yeah, I see it. I'm horrified."

When they finally roll, in addition to the smoke and the goo and the twitching eye, they actually set the thing on fire. Lisa's bandaged hand clutches the phone tightly as it seems to melt in her grasp. Tentacles of smoke seep from the receiver as the eyeball flits from side to side.

Levie spurs Tony on. "Move that fuckin' eyeball!"

They roll and roll, zooming in and out at varying speeds, until eventually they run out of film.

While Brian reloads, Levie teases Julia, "Julia? Don't tear up the equipment!"

Julia, who has been standing idly by, protests her innocence. "I'm not doing anything!"

The camera is reloaded, and they roll right away.

Under Tony's control, the eye actually gives an admirable performance, staring wildly like a frightened animal.

As the goo drips from her hands, Lisa recoils. "Oh, gross!" then, almost as an afterthought, asks "Is this stuff flammable?"

Finally, after every possible variation of the shot has been committed to film, Levie shuts off the camera.^[31] With that one flip of a switch, both the night and the film come to an end.

It's late, after midnight. I guess that about wraps it up.

RESHOOTS

PHOENIX RISING

Wednesday, August 16, 1989 - Day 1

More than three months after the end of principal photography, the production team reassembles at a small effects stage in North Hollywood, which will be our home for the next few days.

The stage is owned and operated by special effects artist John Buechler, a close friend of Richard McGuire's, the two having met while working together on director Stuart Gordon's flamboyant pair of H. P. Lovecraft adaptations, *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*.

It's barely 5:00 pm, and though the air is humid and the temperature high, the mood is cheerful.

There are greetings from old acquaintances and introductions to new colleagues. Camera crew Levie, Dana, and Brian have returned, Nancy Karlin is back as script supervisor, Lance has been upgraded to construction supervisor, and former production assistant Sean Williams has been promoted to 2nd assistant director. Bill and Kerry are once again in makeup and hair, respectively. Our new gaffer is Robert Moreno, who had assisted the lighting crew for a few days back at Stage 4. I meet best boy Larry Roth, who had worked on the show during pick-ups, but to whom I had never been officially introduced. Sanford is the 1st AD, but he has for some reason chosen the name Donato Ricciardella as a pseudonym on the crew list and call sheet. Sanford's younger brother Chris is acting as transportation captain and location manager. Vic Carpenter and Herb Swann are the new sound team, with Vic running the mixer and Herb on the boom.

To keep personnel to a minimum, I've been asked to do double duty. In addition to maintaining my journal and occasionally videotaping the

proceedings, I'm in charge of craft services: providing snacks and drinks and, most importantly, coffee for the crew.

Inside the stage, Lance and his team, along with set decorator Ann Job and assistant set dresser Charlie Doane, have constructed an elaborate set for Lisa's bedroom. It's very much in keeping with the design concept of Lisa's modernist living room, although the color scheme is predominantly monochromatic. The walls are painted in shades of charcoal and grey, and the bedclothes are in black and white, fashionably offset by a few blood-red throw pillows. Above the bed is a (surrealist painter and sculptor) Miró-inspired hanging mobile with nebulous die-cut shapes in orbit around a perfectly round red circle.

Tobe arrives, waves a quick hello, and immediately huddles with Levie to evaluate the set.

Sean hands me a copy of the day's shooting schedule and some new script pages for tomorrow's shoot. Tobe has written several new scenes to be shot over the next couple of days. Evidently, the ending for the film has been entirely reimaged.

While using Steve Neill's video camera to tape the preparations for the first shot, Tobe, who never misses a trick, calls to me from the side of the stage. "Is that a new camera, Stan?"

"It's Steve's," I reply, and immediately launch into my best TV pitchman's voice. "It's lightweight, portable, affordable...!" which makes Tobe chortle.

Cynthia arrives to the set with her hair cut short(!). Having no idea that reshoots on the film were imminent, she had trimmed her locks for an appearance in a TV movie. Kerry's come prepared though and fits her with a long blonde wig that works as an acceptable approximation of her earlier hairstyle.^[32] It's strangely reassuring to see Cynthia in her familiar lavender outfit.

The day's first shot consists of Cynthia taking a first aid kit from a shelf in from her bedroom closet, going to the bed and wrapping her burnt hand in a gauze bandage.

It's a fairly straightforward shot with the camera panning her over to the bed.

The construction crew has done something quite clever. They've positioned a single painted flat off the set to cast a reflection in Lisa's ovoid

mirror and create the impression that the room is much larger than it actually is.

Steve Brooks arrives to the set with a videotape of the latest completed effects scenes. They look great, in particular the barrage of flame that burnishes the window in John Landis' death scene.

Pleased with Tobe's response, Steve excuses himself, saying, "I'm going back to do more magic!"

The second half of the first scene is Lisa's frantic phone call to Olander, who maddeningly attempts to calm her as she tries to get him to understand her paralyzing fear. "Lew, he called me and *fire came out of the phone!*"

Next setup: on Sam's second attempt to reach Lisa by phone, once again her answering machine intercedes, causing his temper to rise. Unknowingly, his low-level anger causes the recording device to smolder.

Lisa's bedroom set doubles as the living room in what essentially is yet another insert: the camera dollies slowly toward the machine as ringlets of smoke seep from its seams.

(On a side note, the neon-blue telephone on the table beside the answering machine is actually a duplicate fabricated by Charlie, since the original has long since been returned to the prop house.)

Brad shows up with his youngest daughter Fiona in tow and goes straight to the makeup trailer to have Steve Neill apply his swollen eye prosthetic.

After nightfall, according to the schedule, we'll be shooting him behind the wheel of the Studebaker as Sam is shot in the shoulder and incinerates the cops in retaliation.

While he's in makeup, I finally get Brad to make a contribution to the sketchbook. He does an excellent portrait of himself encircled in flames, to which he adds the legend "Back to the core with me!" I can see why he considered pursuing art as a career before he got the acting bug.

Fiona also contributes a drawing of a blazing red sun and writes in the first page of the book in her childish scrawl, "This is a picture book."

Actor Michael Rooker drops by the set to pay a visit to both Tobe and Brad. Rooker attained instant acclaim for his brutish performance in the title role of John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. He guest-starred in Tobe's episode of Edward Woodward's TV series *The Equalizer* and also appeared alongside Brad in *Mississippi Burning*.

While they wait for the sun to set, they reset to shoot Cynthia sitting anxiously on the red leather couch, staring into the cracked crystal ball as flashes of lightning bounce off the wall behind her. The neon phone on the table radiates a cool blue light. The couch is unavailable, but a large piece of red leather draped over a chair serves as a suitable substitute. The crystal ball, however, has been living at Tobe's house since the end of production, so it's readily available to be used in the shot.

According to the almanac, there is a lunar eclipse this evening.

As the company moves outside into the night air to watch the eclipse, I chat with Michael Rooker while he bounces Fiona on his shoulders.

Though the night has been overcast, the clouds magically part, giving us a lovely view of the eclipsing moon as it slowly transforms from glowing white to bloody red.

In an inspired move, Levie snatches up the camera and swipes a shot of the celestial event for possible use in the film.

Dressed once again in Sam's wardrobe, Brad is the now center of attention.

New special effects man Terry Woohman, assisted by Eric, runs a tube up the sleeve of Sam's blue blazer for the upcoming bullet hit. The effect is a simple one: fill the tubing with powder and blow through it, emitting a perfect little puff of smoke that simulates a bullet hit.

Sanford spurs them on by saying, "When you're ready, we're ready!"

When Bill Miller-Jones douses Brad with cold water to simulate sweat, Brad yelps, "Whoop!"

"Rise and shine!" laughs Sean.

Amid the hum of the crew's lighthearted banter, Brad asks Tobe, "So, what's gonna happen, Boss?"

Tobe explains the shot, and in thinking about it, Brad seems to recall that the car should be in motion when the shots are fired.

Tobe and Levie look at each other for a fraction of a second, then Levie leaps to his feet, pronouncing, "Let's go look at that scene!"

They both rush headlong for the stage to get a look at the videotape.

"I *knew* it!" Brad laments as he follows them, "I just knew it! I had to open my God damn mouth...!"

Still holding fast to the tubing to keep the powder from spilling out, Eric is unwittingly dragged behind Brad, to the delighted guffaws of the crew.

The Studebaker is parked in the lot behind the stage with Brad at the wheel and the camera trained through the back window. On Sanford's count of three, Terry slingshots a pellet of gel onto the windshield to counterfeit the mark of a bullet cracking the glass. Lying down on the back seat, Eric simultaneously blows powder through the tube and out the pre-torn shoulder of Brad's jacket. Brad's spasm of pain completes the illusion that he's been shot. Reactive light shimmers through the windshield as he turns to the camera and roars, "*Burn*, God damn you!" Larry hand holds the reactive light source while Robert operates the paddle light, the "mercury maraca."

Tobe is on his feet immediately, asking for another take.

Charlie wipes the gel from the window as Terry reloads his wrist rocket and Eric refills the tubing with talcum. This time, Terry stands on a stepladder to get a little more height to take his shot.

On the second take, the gel hit is almost too good, obscuring Brad's face when he turns to deliver his line, but the third time's a charm.

Tobe seems to be having a ball. He strolls around the parking lot, smiling and humming to himself.

Even though it's not in the least bit cold, Brian wears his crew jacket proudly. Issued to us all a few weeks back, the jacket's final design is quite nice, with the fiery red and yellow embroidered patch over the left breast, and the crew member's name over the right.

Brian is slightly self-conscious as I point the video camera at him, waving meekly and mouthing, "Hi, Mom!"

They move to a two-camera setup at the front of the car to shoot Brad's forward close-up, in which Sam suffers the consequences of his rage by heaving up a deluge of fiery vomit.

Far behind the Studebaker, Terry has rigged a horizontal "flame bar." Spewing jets of fire, it's meant to give the represent the cops burning in the distance.

Steve Brooks, operating "B" camera, is frustrated that they can't seem to get the idea to work for both cameras at the same time.

While we wait for them to work out the kinks, Dana grabs the video camera and prowls around the lot, cornering members of the crew and interviewing them in the "ambush" style popularized by Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* fame.

Brian leads him on a tour of the camera truck, proclaiming, "Welcome to Brian's bar and short ends!"

Ignoring him, Dana can't resist zooming in to a tight shot of wardrobe girl Janet Sobel's posterior. "Hm, nice butt," Dana mutters to himself.

Dana then confronts accountant Marc Kunis, sticking the camera in his face and demanding, "Aren't you the guy who signs all those bad checks?"

Marc acknowledges that he is, shamefully confiding that his nickname is "Bounce."

The flame bar concept is abandoned. Instead, Terry releases clouds of smoke that catch the light and fill the background with fog, a much more aesthetically pleasing and far less aggravating effect.

Our new sound mixer and boom operator are Vic Carpenter and Herb Swann, two older gentlemen whose approach to filmmaking is equally old-school. Brad is asked several times to repeat his line so that they can get a sound level with which to calibrate the mixing board, something that previous sound mixer Craig Felberg would never have dreamt necessary. Brad is reluctant but accommodating, acquiescing to their requests even though it requires him to expend a lot of energy probably best reserved for the take.

Vic cut his teeth in series television in the '70s, and it thrills me to learn that he worked on writer/producer Stephen J. Cannell's *The Rockford Files* with James Garner.

"Gentlemen, mount your cameras!" says Sanford, calling the set to order.

Eric takes his place in the back seat and Sean steps in and slates the shot as guest clapper.

A mysterious electrician known only by the singular name "Darryl" crouches on the floor of the passenger seat in order to fill the car with reactive light when Brad convulses and retches flame. (Or at least pretends to. Steve explains that the fire effects will be superimposed in the days ahead.)

I overhear Vic and Herb quietly discussing the late hour.

Herb says to Vic, "Time is slipping away," to which Vic replies, "I'm beginning to slip away myself."

They remind me of an old vaudeville team.

Somehow Brian has gotten his hands on a gas mask. As smoke clouds the air, he puts it on, waving his hands in the air and announcing

authoritatively, “There is nothing to worry about! Smoke is *not* harmful!” Then, he takes out a green plastic water pistol and commences to squirt Nancy with it.

“Stop it!” protests Nancy, “Brian, *I mean it!* You’re getting me all wet!”

Brian, who can never resist a straight line, remarks glibly, “You guys hear that? I’m getting Nancy *wet!*”

Caught in the middle of this tomfoolery, Tobe regards it all with a look of bemused detachment.

Finally, they’re ready to roll.

Sanford rallies the troops, “Here we go, this’ll be picture! Battle stations, men! Smoke!”

Tobe watches the shot through a video monitor.

They roll cameras and Sanford counts off, “One, two, three, *go!*”

The powder squib goes off, Brad shouts, “*Burn*, God damn you!” then leans his head back and lets loose a thunderous howl as the cab overflows with amber light.

Brad slumps in his seat, but Tobe’s not quite finished with him, shouting, “*Now* put it in gear! *Look up!*”

Brad slams the car into gear and stares wildly forward, making as if to speed away.

“*Cut!* Great!” calls Tobe.

“Looked good here!” says Levie.

Eliciting his opinion as effects supervisor, Tobe asks Steve, “That oughta’ do it?”

Steve replies with an enthusiastic “Yeah!”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Sanford addresses the crowd, “that is a wrap!”

Thursday, August 17, 1989 - Day 2

It’s dusk, but the pink sky is rapidly giving way to dark blue.

In the parking lot of the stage, the Studebaker is outfitted with two cameras and attached by tow bar to a Shotmaker truck. The cameras are strapped across the hood of the car, one trained on the driver’s seat and the other on the passenger’s. The grips are scrupulous in their preparations, ensuring that the cameras are fastened securely. It wouldn’t do to have either of these \$250,000 devices tumble to the ground while the vehicles are in motion.

Inside the stage, the construction crew is working on a new variation of the “15-minute conference room” for tomorrow’s shoot, erecting a three-walled set with a curious interlocking faux wood-inlay pattern.

Someone has posted on the stage wall a copy of tabloid newspaper *The Weekly World News* with the fervid headline “POOF! Corpse Vanishes into Thin Air!”

Brad’s daughter Kristina has come along for a visit and accompanies her dad to the Studebaker.

Tobe sits astride the Shotmaker like a monarch on his throne, just a big kid with the world’s largest train set to play with. Also on board are Levie, Nancy, Dana, Herb, and Steve Brooks.

Nancy is loath to be videotaped, so when Eric approaches her with the camera, she whines, “When are we gonna see these pictures, anyway? I’m sick of it!” to which Eric responds sarcastically, “Oh, we’re not actually videotaping. We’re just pretending.”

Brad and Cynthia chat as they wait for the signal to take their places in the car.

The scene is one that fell off the radar during principal photography: Lisa frantically drives Sam to the hospital following the eruption of flames from his arm.

As they speed through the streets, Lisa inadvertently blurts, “God, Sam, it’s just like your parents!”

Sam is confused, having been told that his parents had died in a drowning incident. The conversation grows more heated as Sam confronts Lisa, and she reveals her connection to Olander and his “arrangement” of their romantic assignation.

When Lisa insists, “I love you!” his anger gets the better of him, and his arm explodes in fire once again.

At Levie’s request, Dana makes a final adjustment to the angle of one of the cameras. It’s no simple matter, requiring a socket wrench to reset the camera.

Meanwhile, the grips check and double-check the restraints like a flight crew preparing for takeoff.

Kristina and I sit in Chris’s black convertible, waiting for the camera truck to be readied. As transportation captain, Chris is responsible for the smooth functioning of the Studebaker and needs to be available in case maintenance is required, so we thought we’d come along for the ride.

Making idle conversation, Kristina asks Chris if he's married, eliciting this confusing reply, "Well, I'm married, but I'm not spoken for!"

"Load up, load up, load up, *load up!*" shouts Sanford as he climbs aboard the truck.

Cynthia gets behind the wheel of the Studebaker and Brad takes his place beside her in the passenger seat.

Terry lies on the back seat with his smoker handy.

To provide reactive light for his flameout, a lighting rig has been placed on the floor below Brad to be operated remotely from the truck.

Eric joins us in the convertible and, escorted by two motorcycle cops and one support vehicle, we follow the small caravan out onto the road. From our perspective, there's not much to be seen as we travel the city streets of the San Fernando Valley. Chris follows closely behind, always mindful that we not to be seen in the shot.

After the scene has been played through several times, we pull to the side of the road to allow the crew to re-rig the cameras. One is removed entirely, and the other is secured to the driver's side door for a close two-shot favoring Cynthia's profile.

Tobe especially likes the framing of the shot, commenting that it's not the sort of thing likely to be seen in a conventional film.

While they work out the technical details, Brad sits quietly meditative, seemingly lost in thought.

Eric hops onto the Shotmaker for the remainder of the road trip.

As he situates himself perilously close to the edge of the truck, Tobe cautions Eric to hold tight and keep his camera close.

Sanford wisecracks, "He just wants to flick a little bush with it!" causing a ripple of dawning laughter among the riders.

Back on the road, Tobe watches the scene intently through the video monitor, listening to the dialogue through his headset. Brad is especially effective as he drips with sweat and grimaces in pain, seemingly unable to escape the inferno raging inside him.

"*Cut!*" yells Tobe, and it's back to the stage for a hot meal.

After lunch, the team regroups on Fair Avenue in North Hollywood. Tall electrical towers stand sentry above our heads and a long row of utility poles seems to stretch into infinity. It's the ideal location to represent the power-conscious town on Trinidad Beach.

In the proposed shot, Sam pulls to the side of the road as he is once more overcome with fury. As the fire subsides, he regains his wits and slowly drives off into the night, leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

Tobe and Levie confer with Robert, whose responsibility it is to light this broad landscape. There's some concern as to whether his lighting package is large enough to accomplish the task. Robert assures them that it can be done, and he and his crew set about to make it happen.

There is another issue with the shot. Since the car is in motion, there's no power supply to the required reactive light source.

Tobe's solution is creative. He proposes that when the car pulls to the curb, one of the electricians sneak up and plug the lights into the generator, which will be conveniently hidden behind Eric's El Camino. Once the effect is over, the plug will be pulled and the car can continue on its way.

One problem solved and another rears its ugly head.

The Studebaker stalls.

As Chris puts it to Tobe, "Uh, the fuel pump is giving us some trouble."

Darryl and Chris dive under the hood, and after about fifteen minutes of tugging on wires and checking connections, get the car running again.

Dana is skeptical, saying, "You know, once the camera's rolling, it'll stop."

He must be a psychic as well as a skeptic, because that is exactly what happens.

With the vehicle out of commission, they're forced to abandon the shot and leave behind this stunning location and return to the stage.

The movie gods are not smiling upon us tonight.

The construction crew has added a wall to a small flight of stairs at the back of the effects stage, intending it to be used as the stairwell of Lisa's apartment.

I stand with Tobe and Cynthia on the staircase as he explains to her how one flight of stairs can stand in for several.

"Ohhh, you just change the numbers and the lighting?" she says when she realizes how it's going to work, "Very clever!"

In the hallway adjacent to the stairs, the grips and electricians gather, trading war stories and trying to one-up each other.

"I remember the time we did one hundred and ten setups in one day!"

"Well, *I* remember when we did one hundred and ten setups *in the snow!*"

One particularly salient observation is made: “Whether the budget’s twenty-five thousand or twenty-five million, if the car won’t start, the car won’t start!”

Cynthia flies down the stairs literally dozens of times, pausing only to allow the art department to change the numerals on the wall and for the electricians to change the lighting gels from green to red. Levie shoots the sequence handheld, from above and below, adding some kinetics to the shots by tilting the camera this way and that.

After Cynthia has descended the equivalent of thirty flights of stairs, the night comes to an end. We wrap early, about 4:00 am.

Friday, August 18, 1989 - Day 3

Barbara Leary is a classy lady. With her dark glasses, stylish pinstripe suit, and fashionably short auburn hair, she turns heads as she walks onto the set.

Leary has been cast in the role of the elusive Amy Whittaker, CEO of the Trinidad Beach nuclear facility and close acquaintance of Sam’s ex-wife Rachel.

Not incidentally, she is the much-younger spouse of Timothy Leary, ex-Harvard professor and iconic guru of the 1960s counterculture, and also the sister of *Charlie’s Angels* actress and Bond girl Tanya Roberts.

It’s 7:00 pm, and the crew buzzes around the now-completed conference room, rigging lights, dressing the set, and placing props. An impressive steel and glass conference table is the room’s centerpiece. A portrait of President George H. W. Bush hangs on one wall, flanked on either side by the flags of the USA and California, while the other walls are lined with a stuffy selection of bourgeois group photographs. Near the sleek, modern lectern at the head of the table, a large architectural rendering of the nuclear power plant is set on an upright easel. A 9-light array is hung high above the glass-top table, which is also brightly lit from below. A curtain of orange Mylar hangs just off the set to act as a reflector for the upcoming fire effect.

The scene, apparently a kind of hybrid dream sequence/flashback, appears nowhere on the schedule or in any version of the script. Sam attends a meeting of the power plant’s board of directors. After having been off-line for the past ten years, and despite fierce political opposition, the plant’s reopening is imminent. As she addresses the board from the podium,

Amy bursts into flames as Rachel's horrified screams resound through the room.

Along with about a dozen background extras, several members of the crew are spruced up to participate in the scene. Sean is dashing in his smart dark suit and tie, with his longish hair neatly combed back. Bill looks rather upper crust in his beige sports jacket and matching slacks. Kerry wears a chic, flowing summer dress with a tuxedo mini jacket thrown over her shoulders and Janet is prim and proper in a navy-blue suit and white blouse.

Of course, Dey Young has returned as the catty socialite Rachel, attired in a swank double-breasted top and skintight leather skirt, with her hair done up in a Farrah Fawcett bouffant.

The shot begins on a close-up of Sam's birthmark. Amy gently places her hand over Sam's, then rises from her seat and strides to the podium as the camera follows her, dollying along the length of the conference table and into a close-up.

During her short speech, the camera pans over to Rachel, sitting smugly near the head of the table. Suddenly awash in shimmering orange light, Rachel screams and screams as she presumably witnesses her friend and confidante burned to a crisp before her eyes.

I don't believe that Barbara has ever acted in a film before, but you'd never know it to look at her. Her every move exudes confidence. (She did, however, appear as herself in Alan Rudolph's film *Return Engagement*, a documentary following the exploits of Timothy Leary and G. Gordon Liddy as they embark together on a joint lecture tour. Barbara is also credited as producer on the film.)

The stage reverberates with the low hum of constant conversation, prompting Sanford to hush the crew every few moments.

After the scene is rehearsed several times for both the actors and the camera, they're finally ready to roll.

It's a dream sequence, so no sound is recorded, although the extras are required to applaud and Dey is expected to scream (although not necessarily at full voice).

When Tobe calls "Action!" the crowd claps their hands and Barbara makes her way to the podium.

Sanford asks from off camera, "Dr. Whittaker, how does it feel to finally win?"

With a slyly raised eyebrow, Barbara answers, “Terrific! It’s good for California, too!”

The camera turns to Rachel, her arrogant smile quickly displaced by an expression of sheer terror. As smoke billows and reactive light plays across her face, she emits a high, thin, reedy scream.

With little for him to do, Brad seems content to just sit and watch. Since he’s not to be seen above the waist, he leans back in his chair and relaxes in his tidy blue jeans.

A rumor’s been floating around that Timothy Leary himself is likely to pay us a visit. When a sleek limousine pulls up to the stage, the rumor becomes an indisputable fact.

Leary, staunch proponent of the benefits of LSD and shaman to millions, beams his famous smile as he steps from the car, seeming genuinely happy to be here.

As I welcome him by pinning one of our nuclear power buttons to his lapel, he favors me with his twinkling eyes and an exuberant, “It’s a wild night, isn’t it?”

Riding high on the wave of meeting Timothy Leary, Tobe brings me crashing back to Earth with a simple question, “Stan, is there any coffee?”

After seven takes of Barbara’s steely gaze and Dey’s fragile screams, it’s time to move on to the next comparatively simple setup: as the guests mingle and sip champagne at the board meeting’s after-party, Sam has a contentious disagreement with Amy, who slaps him in the face and storms off.

After two quick takes, Barbara bids us all goodbye and departs on the arm of her infamous husband. [\[33\]](#)

While the crew breaks down the conference room to make space for the next set, Brad meets with Steve Neill in John Buechler’s workshop to begin the lengthy process of applying his new end-stage makeup.

In the film’s newly conceived ending, Sam has not been vaporized, but instead lives on as a crumbling, horribly disfigured monstrosity. The makeup consists of multiple latex appliances for Brad’s head, neck, and arms, and as such could take up to five hours to complete.

Eric and I join them in the workroom to observe and document the entire procedure. It takes me back to the day early in pre-production when we all met at Steve’s home studio for Brad to have his eye and neck cast in latex.

The first step is to have Brad put on a blackened and broken ribcage, putrefied bones protruding from the abdomen. As he slips it over his head, Steve and Eric need to help Brad into it, like a corpulent woman squeezing into a girdle.

“Too tight?” inquires Steve.

With his hands extended goofily above his head, Brad’s muffled voice mumbles inside the corset, “It’s a little tight.” He inhales deeply, and they manage to pull it down over his midriff.

“One size fits all!” I jeer.

Brad’s daughter Kristina is here for the night. Wearing his *Spontaneous Combustion* T-shirt, she settles in to watch her dad’s transformation.

As Top 40 radio plays in the background, Brad takes a seat in the makeup chair. Steve pulls a rubber skullcap down over his ears, gluing down the edges with spirit gum.

Brad asks for something to cover his lap to protect his designer jeans from spatter, explaining, “I remember Mr. Neill here likes to really get into his work!”

On such short notice, Steve has done a remarkable job on sculpting the makeup appliances. Brad’s facemask is both beautiful and grotesque. One side of the face is roasted completely away, exposing the orbit of the eye socket. What skin remains on the other is red and mottled and stretched thin by first-degree burns. The ears are effectively gone and only a few singed patches of hair remain on the scorched, barren scalp.

Once the skullcap is in place, Steve applies the back of the head, a black wasteland of charred tissue and exposed bone. Before gluing it down, Steve attaches a bladder over Brad’s ear to pulsate beneath the skin in performance.

During the interim between principal photography and reshoots, Brad has been in Washington D.C. appearing in William Peter Blatty’s *Exorcist III* with George C. Scott.

Relating his experience with the famously ill-tempered Scott in one particularly demanding scene, he says, “There I am, with four pages of dialogue, and he doesn’t say *dick!*”

Steve moves on to the application of the mask. As he tugs and tucks, getting it to align properly with Brad’s physiognomy, it reminds me of Leatherface placing LG’s filleted face over Stretch’s in *TCM2*. Brad assists by holding the mask in place as Steve applies the adhesive.

With respect to Steve's affiliation with McDonald's in designing and operating their crescent moon "Mac Tonight" character, Brad refers to himself in makeup as "*Crispy* Mac Tonight!"

This inspires a silly series of free associations that culminates in tasteless references to Happy Meals and "charred children."

Meanwhile, Lance and his team have struck the conference room set and are well on their way to converting the stage into the parking garage of Lisa's apartment building. Pale yellow walls have been constructed to demarcate parking spaces and the actual stairwell of the stage has been incorporated into the set.

According to the new script pages, it is here that Lisa not only meets Rachel for the first time but also where her romance with Sam finally comes to its inevitably tragic end.

Back in the workshop, Steve affixes a grisly row of teeth to Brad's upper lip.

Eric takes copious photos of every stage of the process. "You'll be on the cover of every science fiction magazine!" he tells Brad, who seems frankly less than thrilled at the prospect.

Brad has never had such extensive prosthetic makeup before, but endures it all with calm nonchalance, even though at the end of it he's blind in one eye and can barely hear or speak.

"The good news is," says Steve sardonically, "you get to do it *tomorrow*, too!"

Brad wears a "glove" on his hand bearing the ulcerated scar of Sam's birthmark, and the gaping wound on his depleted arm will be exposed through the shredded sleeve of his frayed jacket.

As Steve prepares to apply the arm pieces, I notice that Brad's forearm is bandaged. He's evidently still suffering the effects of the latex rash from months ago. He also retains a scar from the scene in which his shoulder exploded while wrestling with Michael Keys Hall as Cagney.

Fighting boredom, Kristina takes the video camera from me and points it at her dad. "Hi, Daddy!" she says affectionately, "I love you!"

"I love you, too!" rasps Brad from behind his hideous countenance.

Once the application is complete, Steve uses a makeup sponge to dab in details of color and texture. As he applies the finishing touch of blacking out Brad's own teeth, he grouses, "I could never understand why on *Planet of the Apes* they never did this!"

In the parking lot, Carin supervises as Eric uses a propane hand torch to set Sam's jacket on fire. He torches it, stomps out the fire and torches it again, desecrating it for Brad's use in the next scene.

Work continues at a steady pace on the parking garage. One wall is stenciled "Assigned Parking Only," with a fire extinguisher mounted below. The set opens out into the stage's actual parking lot through the wide, raised corrugated steel door. Orange pylons are scattered about and a barrier gate with a yellow and black striped horizontal bar blocks the entrance to the garage.

Before her scene is called, Cynthia adds a drawing to the sketchbook, a colored-pencil portrait of her character, with bright yellow hair and full, red lips. She signs it, "Lisa Wilcox."

Sean approaches me as I videotape the crew at work, asking, "Think we can get some more coffee?"

Toying with him, I respond tersely, "You know where it is, you know how to make it."

"No, I don't," he insists plaintively.

Laughing, and unable to bear his puppy dog demeanor any longer, I escort him to the craft service table where I brew him a fresh pot.

Brad strolls casually onto the set, giving everybody their first look at him in full makeup and wardrobe. Tobe is particularly pleased, smiling from ear to ear as he looks Brad up and down. Shambling around in his dilapidated outfit, Brad would seem right at home in a George A. Romero film. He mingles with the crew, doing his impression of Billy Crystal's *Saturday Night Live* impression of Fernando Llamas: "You look mah-velous!"

Dey Young seems a bit repulsed by Brad's appearance.

She is now costumed in a trim black coverall and black leather gloves, with her hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. Early in the script, Sam refers to Rachel as "Mata Hari," but here she more resembles Diana Rigg as "Mrs. Peel" in the British television series *The Avengers* than the legendary superspy.

It's astonishing what Lance's team has done in just a few short hours. The stage is now a thoroughly convincing parking garage, fully dressed and accommodated.

In the scene, Lisa flees from the stairwell into the parking garage, her hand ablaze, apparently triggered by Marsh's attempt to inject her with the

bilious green fluid. Rachel suddenly appears, wielding the fire extinguisher and dousing Lisa in an apparent effort to put out the flames.

Lisa protests, screaming, “*Stop!* You’re making it *worse!*”

“I *know...*” Rachel replies coldly. “I’m Rachel. Nice to finally meet you,” and continues to spray her down.

Sam, in his shocking new manifestation, seemingly comes from nowhere and seizes Rachel. An electrical charge passes between them, infecting her with SHC. Effortlessly, Sam slams Rachel’s limp body against the wall like a rag doll and turns to confront Lisa.

“Does anybody have a script?” Brad asks from beneath his latex mask.

Luckily, his lines amount to little more than an insistent “*No!*” and a breathless “Lisa, don’t run!” He practices his scratchy, breathy voice as he waits to be called before the cameras.

The first shot of the sequence is an angle on Rachel as she discovers Lisa in distress, removes the extinguisher from the wall, and dusts her with CO².

As Rachel, Dey is appropriately callous in her attempt to terminate her character’s troublesome rival, uttering her lines with bitter sarcasm.

Brad questions Tobe about the action for the next shot. “So, I see her (Rachel), and I see what she’s doing...my purpose is to get her to stop, ’cause I know what it’s doing to Lisa. Now, what happens next?”

Tobe breaks down the scene, instructing Brad when to launch into the frame and how to grab Dey and toss her aside.

“What I *really* want to know,” says Brad, “I want to know at what point I *kill* her!”

After working out the details, they’re prepared to shoot.

The camera focuses on Dey as she brandishes the extinguisher. Shimmering light dances off the walls around her, punctuated by flashes of lightning. Addressing Cynthia off camera, she says matter-of-factly, “Did you hear about Grandfather and Sam? They burned to death,” and releases a cloud of chemical flame retardant in Cynthia’s direction.

Brad abruptly enters the frame, grabs Dey and hisses, “*Stop!*”

He holds her tightly as she whimpers and struggles, trying to wriggle free from his smoldering grasp. After blithely tossing her aside, Brad turns to face Cynthia, pleading, “*No, Lisa, don’t go!* I can *take* your fire!” as the camera rushes forward into a close-up, vividly revealing the terrible reality of Sam’s miserable fate.

Both Brad and Dey are spot-on every time. It's only the usual difficulty of getting the smoke levels right that necessitates more than a few takes.

Terry's assistant Dizzy, a rangy mountain man with a large, full beard, is the new smoke wrangler, and seems a bit overzealous.

Afterwards, Dey goes immediately to makeup to prepare for her big effects shot, in which Rachel's face bubbles and bursts and spews ghastly black bile. One of John Buechler's boys has been assigned to apply the effects makeup and attach the swelling bladders.

For the next setup, two cameras are trained on Cynthia as she leans back against the hood of Lisa's black convertible, waiting to be doused by the fire extinguisher.

Tobe mans the extinguisher for the shot, seeming secretly delighted at the prospect. The orange glow of the reflected light accentuates his bright eyes and devilish grin.

Although he surely knows it already, I point out to him that while Dey's extinguisher emitted a powdered chemical, he's spraying Cynthia with compressed foam. He regards me as he might an inquisitive child and assures me that nobody will notice.^[34]

Dizzy smokes up Cynthia's jacket before the cameras roll.

Since Dey is in makeup, Nancy reads her lines in her patented Bronx twang.

Wild-eyed, Cynthia shrieks in pain and panic as Tobe enthusiastically sprays her with intermittent spurts of foam.

"Cut!"

Tobe is pleased, but unfortunately there's a snag. Steve Brooks, operating the second camera, informs Tobe, "I couldn't see her face for all the smoke."

Tobe turns to Levie and asks, "How about you?"

"Same thing," Levie demurs.

Relaxing in a corner of the stage, Brad lays on a gurney with his feet up, looking like a charred corpse on a morgue slab.

Barely able to contain himself, Eric pulls me aside and insists that I simply must check out Dey in the makeup room.

Curious, I saunter over and casually enter the workshop.

Dey is not happy. Sitting alone in the middle of the room, a cluster of multicolored dime-store balloons stuck to her face, she looks like a sad, demented clown.

I can barely keep from guffawing as I excuse myself and make a quick exit.

After wiping the car clean of foam, they're ready for another shot.

Once again, Cynthia sprawls across the hood of the car and Tobe gleefully pelts her with the sudsy lather as he screams bloody murder. The shot probably goes on longer than she'd like, as Tobe seems to be having the time of his life.

They turn the camera around to face the door to the stairwell, where Rachel will meet her revolting demise.

Dey comes onto the set, clearly self-conscious about her makeup. She looks something like a chipmunk with chubby purplish cheeks, her big eyes peering out from behind her bloated, bruised skin.

To her credit, she refuses to let embarrassment to get the better of her, and steps right up in front of the camera.

It's yet another one-shot deal. Narrow plastic tubes run from plungers filled with blood, bile, and a black, viscous liquid to the bladders beneath Dey's makeup. Three of John Buechler's assistants are responsible for making the effect work. When the camera rolls, they'll squeeze the plungers, sending the fetid concoction flowing through the tubes and into the bladders, causing Dey's face to pulse and swell and ultimately to burst, spewing gobs of black goo everywhere.

Levie's fatigue is beginning to get to him. As he composes the shot, Dizzy's hat keeps bobbing into the frame.

"Hey, I can see your hat!" Levie calls out. When he can't seem to get his attention, he turns to Eric and asks, "What's his name?"

"Dizzy," Eric replies.

"*Dizzy?*" Levie repeats.

"Yep."

"Um, sorry I asked."

Before they're quite ready to shoot, Dey alerts Tobe that the bladders are starting to seep prematurely. "Oh, it's really coming through!"

The crew springs into action and they roll camera immediately.

Dey turns to face the wall.

Tobe cues the effects. "Okay, reactive...and smoke. *Action!*"

Dey turns to the camera as her face ripples and swells, splitting open and spewing gushers of vile black jelly. She sobs and wails and thrashes

about as the putrid mess spills from her cheeks and eyes as if all her bodily fluids were evacuating at once.

It's frankly disgusting to watch.

Finally, when she slides to the floor in a pathetic heap, the crew rewards her with a raucous round of applause.

As his wide smile attests, Tobe is thrilled with the result.

Whatever mortification or discomfort Dey was forced to suffer seems to have been worth it. The effect is spectacular. [\[35\]](#)

Perhaps appropriately, today's call sheet bears a quote from Levie: "Moviemaking is *not* for the timid!"

It's been a long day.

As we wrap at 8:30 am, I make a point of handing Tobe the sketchbook. After all, this may be my last opportunity to have him contribute.

Saturday, August 19, 1989 - Day 4

Arriving to the set on this last day of shooting, I'm greeted by Tobe, waving the sketchbook in the air and grinning. To my surprise, he's added three new drawings to its pages. The first is difficult to describe. It seems to be a kind of impressionist self-portrait made up of elements from the film: glowing eyes, a nuclear explosion, the toy carousel, all in bright hues of pink and yellow and red, and labeled, "Sam's Father." The second drawing appears to be a storyboard for Sam's DNA experience, and the third is a sketch of the beachfront nuclear power plant, a shark's dorsal fin swimming the ocean in the foreground.

I'm gratified that he took the time to make such a generous contribution to the book.

The crew is assembled in the stairwell for the next series of shots. In the upcoming sequence, Lisa flees down the stairs, chased by the incinerated but still very much alive Dr. Marsh. As Marsh lunges for her, brandishing the green-glowing syringe, she loses her footing and tumbles down the stairs. In the struggle, Lisa somehow disarms him, winding up with the syringe in her hand. She plunges it violently into his heart. He topples backward over the banister and, in a fluke of capricious fortune, splits his guts open on a carelessly untended pane of sharp glass.

Rick Barker is our 2nd unit stunt coordinator and the third person to portray Marsh in the film. A veteran stunt performer, his credits are too

numerous to list, but he's worked on projects as varied as Alex Cox's *Repo Man*, Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me*, and Mick Garris' *Critters 2*.

Stuntwoman Debby Ross is Cynthia's stand-in for the potentially dangerous stairway fall.

With Marsh intended to be seen only in the shadows, there was no budget supplied for effects makeup. Eric, however, insists that he can whip something up at no cost and in no time at all. Tobe gives him the go-ahead, and while the camera crew shoots Cynthia running down the steps, Rick retires to the workshop to have Eric work his magic.

With little more than a few torn paper towels, a bottle of liquid latex, and some black and red makeup borrowed from Steve Neill's kit, Eric swiftly produces an impressive burn makeup.

Meanwhile, Steve and Brad are in the first hour of Brad's metamorphosis into a walking heap of smoking ash. The process seems to go much faster tonight, Steve having ironed out most of the complications in last night's application.

The crew gathers in the stairwell for the stunt shots.

At the top of the steps, Levie handholds "A" camera, while Steve Brooks operates "B" camera from below.

While Debby wears Lisa's outfit and blonde wig, Rick is outfitted in Marsh's trench coat and gloves, his face as black as coal and his grey hair haphazardly jutting out in every direction.

On Tobe's call of "Action!" Debby takes a perfect tumble down the steps. Rising unsteadily to her feet, she briefly grapples with Rick on the staircase landing.

"Cut!" Tobe shouts, and it's straight on to the next setup.

With both cameras trained on him, one from below and one from above, Rick limbers up, preparing to fling himself over the banister.

Cynthia mounts the stairs and takes her position in front of him.

As the cameras roll, she stabs him with the syringe and he hurls himself backwards over the railing, landing safely on a waiting stunt pad.

Truly a professional, Rick makes it look effortless. He dusts himself off and nods modestly as the crew applauds.

There's one rather bizarre shot left in the sequence.

A large pane of clear acrylic leans against a sawhorse beneath the stairwell landing. Holding against his stomach a plastic bag filled with

animal entrails and glow-stick goo, Rick falls onto the windowpane, twitching and convulsing and literally spilling his guts.

(After which, Steve Brooks tells me, Marsh will burst into flames, courtesy of postproduction special effects.)

What I find most interesting about this scene as scripted is that Marsh's fate is in no way telegraphed to the audience. No shot to establish the presence of the glass, not even the slightest indication of potential danger, as would likely be found in a more conventional film. It's entirely unexpected, pure *deus ex machina*, which I find both shocking and refreshing.

Rain is in the forecast tonight.

In the parking lot of the stage, the grips have erected a fifteen-foot "drip bar," a horizontal metal pipe originally designed for irrigation but that serves perfectly well as a provider of artificial rain.

According to the new script pages, this is the film's new finale. Having dispensed with Rachel, Sam turns his attention to Lisa, but terrified by his grotesque countenance, she flees into the parking lot. He hobbles behind her, trying to make her understand that he possesses the power to extinguish her inner fire. Suddenly, the sky cracks open and they are drenched by an unexpected cloudburst. Trapped by the sudden downpour, Sam writhes in unimaginable torment. The rainfall ravages him as he hopelessly reaching out to Lisa, ultimately melting away into a pile of soggy ashes.

While everyone else is bundled up in coats and ponchos and rain gear, Brian, in his fashionably torn T-shirt and pop art board shorts, looks as if he'd be perfectly comfortable lounging on the beach.

Cynthia, on the other hand, wraps herself in a pink terry cloth robe to gird herself against the cold.

Steve Neill has completed Brad's makeup in record time, less than three hours from beginning to end.

The dolly sits at the entrance to the parking garage, poised to track with Cynthia as she attempts to elude Brad.

Dripping wet in their rain slickers and caps, Levie and Dana look like a pair of swarthy sailors manning a small seafaring vessel.

As they rehearse the dolly move, Brad playfully staggers down the driveway like a drunken zombie.

"*Daddy!*" squeals Fiona, dancing up to him in her cute pink outfit, completely unaffected by her father's freakish appearance.

“Sweetie pie, you need to go with Mommy,” Brad says protectively. “Where’s Mommy?”

It’s fun to see his paternal instincts showing through all that hideous makeup. I can only imagine what Fiona makes of her father’s vocation.

As so often in the film, this shot involves lightning, reactive light, smoke, and visual effects, as well as the added factor of the pouring rain.

Larry operates the lightning from atop a ladder at the far side of the lot, Robert controls the reactive light with the shimmer paddle, and Dizzy handles the mole smoker.

In the background of the shot, all that remains of Rachel is a black smudge on the wall.

They’re ready to roll.

Tobe calls out instructions to the smoke wrangler: “Okay, smoke her up and get Brad real good! Okay, Dizzy, run, hide! Aaaand...*action!*”

The dolly paces Cynthia as she races down the drive, screaming huskily and backing herself up against the grill of the Studebaker, which is conveniently parked at the foot of the drive. Brad limps behind her, contorting painfully as the rain hits him.

“*Cut!*”

When Sam melts away, what’s left behind is a perfectly round pile of fulminating ash. Throughout production, this circular shape has figured prominently—Sam’s birthmark, the rising sun, the carousel, the round hatbox, the gold watch, the crystal ball, even the distinctive “spinner” grill on the Studebaker. Here, in the movie’s finale, this motif (to use a trite but fitting phrase) has come full circle.

Working together, Richard McGuire and Lance Simco have contrived a mixture of dry ice and black ash to represent Sam’s steaming residue.

When Tobe asks him to stand on the slippery pile of icy rubble, Brad is understandably reticent. “Well, I dunno,” he says uncertainly, “I never did that with dry ice before.”

Tobe cajoles him, saying, “Well, you’ll just be on it a couple of seconds.”

Brad wonders aloud, “What’s gonna happen if I step on that stuff there?”

“It’s gonna be cold, man!” Levie cracks. ^[36]

Sanford settles the issue by simply stepping up to the pile and standing on it. “See, no problem!” he declares, “Let’s shoot!”

What's happening in the scene is perhaps difficult to make clear. Lisa is backed against the Studebaker as Sam advances on her. The sudden rainfall instigates Sam's "meltdown," and he evaporates into the pavement. After a brief moment of calm, Lisa bursts into flames. On the verge of being irrevocably consumed, a spectral tendril materializes from Sam's ashes and extinguishes the fire that engulfs her. Saved from an agonizing, fiery death by Sam's intervention from beyond the grave, Lisa stands over his remains, exhausted and confused, but alive.

Nancy, ever the diligent script supervisor, observes that the headlights on the Studebaker are off when according to her notes they should be lit.

Sanford instructs Sean to turn on the headlights, but vouches, "[We'll] never see it! *Never* in a million years will we see it! But if you want 'em on, we'll turn 'em on."

"I don't know," Tobe considers. "It may fuck the thing up, actually."

"That's what *I* was thinking," says Sanford.

"Mm, let's leave it off," Tobe decides.

"They'll never know," Sanford whispers conspiratorially.

Brad leans rakishly against the generator, waiting patiently for his turn before the cameras. ^[37]

Tobe confers with Steve Brooks about the timing of the lighting effects, as it will be Steve's job to produce the visual effects needed in the shot; Lisa immersed in flames and Sam dwindling away into nothingness.

In order to capture Sam's disappearance, Tobe calls "Freeze!"

Brad exits the frame as Cynthia remains perfectly still, resuming her action when the flashbulbs pop.

When I facetiously comment that it's the same time-honored technique used on the television series *Bewitched* in the '60s and '70s, I get a wall of blank stares from the crew around me.

The hour is late, the end of the show is fast approaching, and everybody's getting a little flighty.

Steve Neill asks Tobe how Brad's makeup looks.

"Pour some more pus on him!" Sanford interjects.

"Yeah, more *pus*!" Tobe enthusiastically agrees, which starts a chorus of "More *pus*, more *pus*!" from the crew.

It's the last shot of the show, but it feels much like any other.

Tobe sits behind his monitor as Sanford calls for the roll. Heavy drops of rain spatter the hood of the Studebaker.

“Smoke ’em up!” Tobe calls, “*Action!*”

Brad stiffens, stretching his arms to the sky as if he’s being broken on the rack.

“*Freeze!*” shouts Tobe.

Brad gingerly steps out of the shot, sighing and settling into a waiting canvas chair.

“Flash!” cries Tobe, and the flashbulbs pop.

Cynthia succumbs to the flames as Nancy counts, “One, two, three, four...”

“*Fire!*” shouts Tobe.

Swallowed up by smoke and shimmering orange light, Cynthia screams and crumples to the ground in unspeakable agony.

Suddenly, all is calm. Cynthia rises and cautiously approaches the pile of smoldering ash.

“Look into it!” Tobe calls out to her. “Look at your hand! Back away! *Look up!* Lightning! Look back down! Look up! *Lightning!*”

Cynthia gazes up into the sky, blinking into the flashing light. [\[38\]](#)

“*Cut!*”

And so it ends. [\[39\]](#)

After all the days of long hours and perspiration, all the weeks and months of hard work and dedication, all of the fun, friction, and folly, *Spontaneous Combustion* is finally in the can.

I can’t wait to see how it turns out.

That’s a wrap.

AFTERMATH

CHARRED REMAINS

Tobe Hooper's *Spontaneous Combustion* never received a proper theatrical release. Whether through the inability of the production company to garner a distribution deal or a perceived lack of audience interest, it was ultimately relegated to the deadly direct-to-video market, where it was trashed by critics and summarily dismissed. It's a shame because, while the film is far from perfect, there's much in it to recommend, particularly Brad Dourif's unquestionably fascinating performance, and many find the film to be thoroughly entertaining.

Much of the difficulty that some audiences have with *Spontaneous Combustion* can be traced, in my opinion, to the brutal cuts and curious choices made during postproduction, which rendered the already convoluted storyline only that much harder to follow. My own reaction to that first screening was conflicted. I was overwhelmed by the stunning beauty of the photography, but disappointed with the changes, especially the wholesale elimination of one particular thread of the storyline. Also, I remember feeling strongly that the new ending was especially weak, thinking instead that the destruction of the power plant would have been a far more satisfying, if fatalistic, climax to the film.

Interestingly enough, and despite these considerable obstacles, in the ensuing years the film has enjoyed an unpredictably viable afterlife. To this day, it continues to be available on video. There was a time when hardly a week went by that it wasn't being broadcast on the Sci-Fi Channel. It even has a champion of sorts in the person of Japanese filmmaker Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Cure*, *Pulse*).

Hooper's subsequent output has been occasionally unremarkable but more often quite good, most notably in the arena of television. Following *Spontaneous Combustion*, he directed *I'm Dangerous Tonight* for the USA

Network. Starring the stunning Madchen Amick (who was hot at the time owing to the phenomenal success of David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks*) and film icon Anthony Perkins (sadly, in one of his last roles), it's a gentle thriller that defies categorization—part horror film, part fairy tale, part tragic romance. It's wonderfully crafted and exceedingly clever and, in my opinion, has not received the appreciation that it deserves.

Many members of the crew of *Spontaneous Combustion* rejoined Tobe on *I'm Dangerous Tonight*, including DP Levie Isaacks, costume designer Carin Hooper, wardrobe supervisor Julia Gombert, makeup effects artist Steve Neill, sound mixer Craig Felberg, still photographer Eric Lasher, and myself as videographer (which probably makes my estimation of the film a bit biased).

Tales from the Crypt was HBO's sly foray into the horror genre. Based on the classic EC comic books of the same name, and executive produced by directors Robert Zemeckis and Richard Donner, among many others, this anthology series featured a new story, a new cast of characters, and a new director each week. Hooper's episode, entitled *Dead Wait*, starred James Remar as an opportunistic treasure seeker who, because of his desirable head of red hair, ends up on the wrong end of a machete. Whoopie Goldberg is also featured along with John Rhys-Davies, Indiana Jones' bombastic sidekick from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Levie Isaacks, employed as an alternating DP (with Rob Draper) on the series, drew the long straw and served as Hooper's cinematographer on the episode. Eric Lasher was also on hand, being engaged as the still photographer for the whole of the show's 1991 season. It turned out to be one of my favorite entries of the entire series.

A segment of John Carpenter's triple bill of short features known collectively as *Body Bags* was Hooper's next endeavor. Appropriately entitled *Eye*, it starred *Star Wars*' Mark Hamill as the reluctant recipient of an eye transplant that yields horrific results. Pretty tame by Hooper's standards, it's still a credible piece of work. Notably, Hooper also made a cameo appearance as a creepy morgue attendant in Carpenter's wraparound sections.

A feature film adaptation of a Stephen King's short story *The Mangler* was Hooper's next project. Ted Levine (unforgettable as Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme's sensational *Silence of the Lambs*) stars as a past-his-prime detective charged with investigating a series of grisly deaths

somehow connected to a local sweat shop. *Spontaneous Combustion's* visual effects supervisor Steve Brooks collaborated on the screenplay and Tony Hooper designed the hulking monstrosity of the title. There are parts of the film that I like a lot, chiefly Robert England's retrogressive performance, but it is not held in high regard, although it has remarkably spawned two sequels. (One interesting side note: Eric Lasher and I assisted Tony in constructing a prototype model of the Mangler, with which Eric produced a stunning art photo for use as a promotional presale tool.)

Probably Hooper's most accomplished work in television is the feature-length pilot for the UPN series *Nowhere Man*. Bruce Greenwood is photojournalist Tom Vale, whose identity is torn out from under him by a nefarious shadow government. Extraordinarily well crafted, it marked an auspicious debut for a television program that still commands a cult following today. There's no end to the skill and ingenuity of Hooper's direction, and his handling of the actors (including Ted Levine, reuniting with him after working together on *The Mangler*) is especially adept. It should also be noted that the provocative photograph that serves as catalyst for the labyrinthine plot machinations of the series was taken by Eric Lasher, based on a sketch by production designer Craig Stearns. It was also my pleasure to serve as videographer on this show as well.

Continuing the trend, Hooper followed up *Nowhere Man* with another genre television pilot, this time for NBC. Nominally inspired by *The X-Files*, *Dark Skies* was a 1960s-era science fiction period piece dramatizing the government's supposed efforts to suppress the truth of the UFO phenomenon. Starring Eric Close and Megan Ward, the series showed great promise, but quickly ran out of steam following the pilot episode.

An episode of *Perversions of Science*, an anthology spin-off of *Tales from the Crypt* based on EC's Weird Science comics, gave Hooper another opportunity to mix comedy and horror. Starring Jason Lee, (who years later achieved fame on television with his series *My Name Is Earl*), Jamie Kennedy, unparalleled comic genius Harvey Korman, and Laraine Newman (late of *Saturday Night Live* and Hooper's own *Invaders from Mars*), it's a modest but entertaining frolic.

An unaired pilot directed by Hooper and entitled *Prey* is noteworthy primarily for its cast, which included *Twin Peak's* Sherilyn Fenn and Michael Stuhlbarg, who would achieve well deserved recognition years later both for his starring role in the Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man*

and for his turn as elegant mobster Arnold Rothstein in Martin Scorsese's HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*.

Hooper next travelled to Egypt for production on *Tobe Hooper's Night Terrors*, the first film to bear his imprimatur above the title. Another film which is in my opinion seriously underrated, it is nevertheless easy to understand that many audiences simply don't appreciate its admittedly subversive embrace of the charms of the Marquis de Sade. It's uneven, but delectably vile.

Hooper stalwart William Finley (*Eaten Alive*, *The Funhouse*) appears as an oblivious father and Robert Englund returns to the fold in a dual role as both a slippery egalitarian and the aforementioned Marquis.

Hooper returned to cable television with a quirky comedy thriller called *The Apartment Complex*. Chad Lowe (Rob's younger brother) stars as a psychology student and hapless newcomer to a sinister condominium populated by a group of assorted deviants and misfits. The divine Amanda Plummer is also featured as a flirty, possibly deranged neighbor. It's worth mentioning that the film's cinematographer is Jacques Haitkin, probably best known for his moody work on Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. This little-seen jewel remains unavailable on DVD, which is regrettable, given that it's such a delightful hybrid of dark depravity and inspired silliness.

The Others was another short-lived paranormal television series inspired by the *X-Files* phenomenon. Hooper directed one episode, a spooky tale of a haunted airplane. The series starred Julianne Nicholson and Gabriel Macht, both of whom would ultimately go on to greater success, Nicholson in TV's *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and *Boardwalk Empire*, and Macht as the title character in Frank Miller's film adaptation of Will Eisner's influential comic strip *The Spirit*. Hooper also cast Dale Dye as the pilot of the spirit-plagued aircraft.

The ill-begotten feature *Crocodile* was next on Hooper's slate. Despite his best efforts and energetic performances of a cast of young newcomers, the film suffers terribly from a weak script and sub-standard computer graphics. While not a complete disaster, by any objective measure the film's negative attributes far outweigh its positive aspects, and it was quite rightly consigned to the wasteland of direct-to-video. Still photographer Eric Lasher joined the company for several weeks of filming in the picturesque small town of Obregon, Mexico.

Hooper directed segments of two episodes of Fox Television's *Night Visions*, a supernatural anthology series in the mold of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. *Cargo*, in which Jamie Kennedy reunites with Hooper for a tale of cannibalistic stowaways aboard a cargo ship, and *Maze*, featuring Thora Birch (hot off the success of Sam Mendes' Oscar-winning *American Beauty*) as a recalcitrant college student who, after escaping the unwanted advances of an amorous boy by ducking into an elaborate campus maze, finds herself trapped in an alternate dimension. Both segments are extremely well crafted, with *Maze* being a particularly dreamlike piece of work.

The series ended before *Maze* could be broadcast, but fortunately the powers that be at the Sci-Fi Channel included it when they stitched together two unaired episodes and billed the result as an "original" feature film entitled *Shadow Realm*.

Taken was Steven Spielberg's much-anticipated TV series devoted to the theme of alien abduction. Conceptually similar to *Dark Skies*, its ten-episode run centered on the lives of three families profoundly affected by the abductee phenomenon over the span of four generations. Series creator Leslie Boehm hired Hooper to direct the pilot episode of the highly ambitious project. Critical reaction was split on the relative merits of the show, some hailing it with superlatives and others dismissing it as shallow and derivative. Hooper's episode began the series with strength and style, but before long the show collapsed under the weight of its own pretensions. It's worth noting that Eric Close, the lead actor from *Dark Skies*, also appears in a key featured role in *Taken*.

In 1976, director Dennis Donnelly released *The Toolbox Murders*, a film considered at the time to be little more than cheap exploitation. An unlikely vehicle to revivify Hooper's flagging feature film career, his exceptional remake of this controversial horror classic not only vastly improves on its predecessor in every way but is also far and away his most accomplished film since *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. His sure-handed control of the material is evident in every frame. Of all Hooper's movies, this is the one most unfairly disregarded. In the years to come, I expect that many more horror fans will discover it and come to appreciate it for its disturbing effectiveness and keen intelligence. Screenwriters Jace Anderson and Adam Gierasch, two of the four writers credited with the screenplay for

Crocodile, redeem themselves with a taut, suspenseful script that doesn't scrimp on the gore.

Mortuary was Hooper's third collaboration with screenwriters Anderson and Gierasch. It could be said that the film is much misunderstood, audiences having failed to appreciate its tongue-in-cheek pastiche of horror tropes. But despite the fact that it's intended as more a parody of a horror movie rather than the thing itself, the finished film is confused and uneven. Interestingly, young Dan Byrd, cast as the lead in the film, played the role of Mark Petrie in director Mikael Salomon's TNT remake of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*.

Originally intended for direct-to-video release, Anchor Bay's production of creator Mick Garris' horror anthology series *Masters of Horror* was instead acquired for broadcast by Showtime. Hooper directed two hour-long episodes, the first being *Dance of the Dead*, based on a story by Richard Matheson, the acclaimed author of the horror classic *I Am Legend*, with a teleplay by his son, Richard Christian Matheson. An allegorical tale of postapocalyptic teen romance, Hooper does some of his most outlandish work in this twisted, difficult-to-categorize dystopian romp. Robert Englund returns to the fold with an appropriately over-the-top turn as the demented emcee of a sleazy necro-fetish nightclub. It's worth noting that star Jonathan Tucker was also featured in Marcus Nispel's surprisingly effective remake of Hooper's own *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Hooper's contribution to the second season of *Masters of Horror* was entitled *The Damned Thing*, very loosely based on Ambrose Bierce's short story of the same name. Richard Christian Matheson again provides the teleplay for a morbid tale of Lovecraftian malevolence and fossil fuels. Like Hooper's previous outing, critical reaction was split. Many viewers found the piece compelling and the graphic gore satisfying, while others were disappointed with the adaptation and found Sean Patrick Flanery's performance lackluster and Ted Raimi's inappropriately ham-fisted.

For a long time, Hooper's name was associated with a feature film adaptation of Stephen King's novel, *From a Buick 8*. As so many film projects do, this one simply failed to materialize, which is unfortunate, as I think something quite worthwhile might have resulted from the collaboration.

The latest project bearing Hooper's imprimatur is *Djinn*, an Arabic horror story with echoes of *Poltergeist* and *Rosemary's Baby*. Filmed in the

United Arab Emirates in 2011 and never released theatrically in the U.S. (although it is currently available on Blu-ray and there are rumors of a director's cut) it is a claustrophobic thriller with a potent dread of the unknown that, sadly, proved to be Hooper's final film prior to his untimely death in August of 2017 at the age of 74.

As is abundantly clear, through the years Hooper had continued to ply his trade in every venue afforded him. However controversial the results, there can be no doubt that he was a unique filmmaker and a man devoted to his craft.

In particular, *Spontaneous Combustion* is a flawed enterprise because, as so often happens, something faltered between the conception and the execution. The movie that Hooper set out to make is far better than the film that ultimately surfaced. However, over time it seems to have amassed a small cadre of devoted followers. I count myself among them. Hooper himself has great fondness for the film. After attending an early screening, I distinctly recall him referring to the movie as "a little gem."

It's my profound hope in writing this book that those readers with affection for the film will come to appreciate Hooper's original intentions, that those who denigrate it might have a second look and reevaluate their opinions, and that those who have neither seen nor heard of it will seek it out for the first time.

Lastly, as mawkish as it may seem, I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to Tobe for having allowed me the opportunity to take part in an experience that I have long since treasured and that has provided me with memories and friendships that I continue to cherish.

APPENDIX I

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

CREDITS

Directed by - TOBE HOOPER
Produced by - JIM ROGERS
Screenplay by - TOBE HOOPER and HOWARD GOLDBERG
Story by - TOBE HOOPER
Executive Producers - HENRY BUSHKIN
ARTHUR SARKISSIAN
Co-Produced by - JERROLD W. LAMBERT
Associate Producer - SANFORD HAMPTON
Director of Photography - LEVIE ISAACKS
Production Designer - GENE ABEL
Edited by - DAVID KERN
Music by - GRAEME REVELL
Costume Designer - CARIN HOOPER
Special Visual Effects by - STEPHEN BROOKS
Casting - CAROL LEWIS
Sam Kramer - BRAD DOURIF
Lisa Wilcox - CYNTHIA BAIN
Dr. John Marsh - JON CYPHER
Lew Olander (Orlander) - WILLIAM PRINCE
Nina - MELINDA DILLON
Rachel - DEY YOUNG
Springer - TEGAN WEST
Dr. Cagney - MICHAEL KEYS HALL
General - DALE DYE
Dr. Persons - JOE MAYS
Peggy Bell - STACY EDWARDS

Brian Bell - BRIAN BREMER
Young Olander (Orlander) - FRANK WHITEMAN
Vandermeer - ANDRÉ DE TOTH (uncredited)
Student Director - JUDY PRESCOTT
School Nurse - JUDY BEHR
Nurse at Hospital - BETSY THOMAS
Radio Technician - JOHN LANDIS
Waiter - JAMIE ALBA
Dr. Simpson - MARK ROBERTS
Mr. Fitzpatrick - RICHARD WARLOCK
Jennifer - JUDITH JONES
Scientist - BILL FORWARD
Maitre D' - RON BLAIR
Vicky - MIMI WEARN
Doctor in 50s - SANDY IGNON
Student in Theater - NICK GAMBELLA
Maid - PATRICIA GALLAGHER LAYTON
Amy Whitaker - BARBARA LEARY
Hospital Guard - PAUL BARESSI
Preacher on Radio - GEORGE "BUCK" FLOWER
1st Unit Stunt Coordinator - GREG GAULT
2nd Unit Stunt Coordinator - RICK BARKER
Stunts - RICHARD WARLOCK
MONTY COX
DON PIKE
PAULA MOODY
GLORY FIORAMONTI
DEBBIE ROSS

Production Manager - SANFORD HAMPTON
1st Assistant Director - PAUL MOEN
2nd Assistant Directors - KRISTI "KAT" MORAIS
MICHAEL LOONEY

Production Executive - GLENN SOBEL
Production Coordinator - ROCHELL GOODRICH
Production Secretary - LISA VAN COTT
Production Accountant - MARC KUNIS

2nd Camera Operator - MICHAEL LUND
1st Assistant Camera - DANA W. GONZALES
DOUG ADAM
2nd Assistant Camera - BRIAN BERNSTEIN
Clapper/Loader - MONICA SILVERA
Steadicam Operator - JOHN NULER
Script Supervisor - NANCY KARLIN
Additional Script Supervisor - JEANNE TALBOT
Gaffer - DAVID HAYBALL
Best Boy Electric - MOLLY CHESHIRE
Electricians - JOHN CHESHIRE
CHARLIE WALDREN
ANN-MARIE FENDREN
BILL SWIFT
JON KEALY
WILLIAM KOSKI
Key Grip - TODD GRIFFITH
Best Boy Grip - MONTY SPILLERS
Dolly Grip - RICHARD CROMPTON
Grips - MARCUS "ROO" FLOWER
TOM COOK
WILLIAM HOLDSWORTH
MICHAEL STOCKS
BASIL SCHMIDT
SIMON SCHEELINE
BRIAN LIBERMAN
BOB CLANCY
Assistant Art Director - RICHARD McGUIRE
Draftsman - GARY FRUTKOFF
Set Decorator - ANN JOB
Set Dresser - TIMOTHY KEATING
Assistant Set Dresser - CHARLIE DOANE
Prop Masters - FRANK BERTOLINO
BILL ROBERTS
Special Makeup Effects Created by - STEVE NEILL
Makeup Effects Crew - GILLIAN NEILL

BETH HATHAWAY
MARK RAPPAPORT
MICHAEL F. HOOVER
MICHAEL R. JONES
TONY HOOPER
ERIC LASHER
STAN GIESEA

Pyro and Floor Effects - GUY FARIA
Assistant Pyro Effects - DUNCAN W. PUETT
PAT PATTERSON
LOU CARLUCCI
PANAGOS CALLAS

Special Mechanical Effects - TONY HOOPER

Sound Mixers - CRAIG FELBERG
CAMERON HAMZA

Boom Operators - CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR
KEN STEPHENS

Still Photographer - ERIC LASHER
Costume Supervisor - JULIA GOMBERT
Costumer - JANET SOBEL

Makeup Artist - BILL MILLER-JONES
Hair Stylist - KERRY MENDENHALL

Melinda Dillon's Makeup by - DOREEN SCHULTZ
Transportation Coordinator - LAWRENCE MORGAN
Transportation Captain - "BUFFALO" BOB LANG

Driver - MIKE MOORE

Assistant to the Executive Producers - SEAN DOYLE WILLIAMS

Assistants to the Producer - MIKE TREAS
CAMILLA FLUXMAN

Assistant to the Director - RITA BARTLETT
Production Assistants - ROBINSON MILLER
ASHLEY FRIEDMAN

DARREL GREEN
CHRIS KINCAID
MARK BATZA
NOG CALLAS

Casting Assistant - MIMI WEARN
Assistant Editors - MARK L. LEVINE
ARTHUR J. CODRON
2nd Assistant Editor - DAVID FLETCHER
Craft Service - CHRISTINE SCOTT
KIM FUSCH
First Aid - MOLLY MALLOY
Location Manager - SETH CIRKER
Security - MIKE LANG
Location Security - MARK VANCE
Supervising Scenic Artist - LANCE SIMCO
Scenic Artist - BLAKE BELTRAM
Assistant Scenic Artist - RICHARD G. HUSTON
Sign Painter - GARY GRABER
Standby Carpenter - NEIL KINSELLA
Carpenters - EARL VODRY
JIM VODRY
SUSAN FINNEGAN
BOB STURTEVANT
ALLAN MURRAY
LEE BORISOF
Leadman - FRED HAMPTON
Stage Manager - JOHN GARRETT
Model Supervisor - GARY BAILARD
Extras Casting - JACOV BRESLER
Extras Coordinator - PAT GALLAGHER
Stand-ins - ADRIANO DEFREITAS
LESLIE LAHODA
Journalist - STAN GIESEA
Unit Publicist - NAN HERST
Marketing Consultant - STEPHEN MANPEARL
Legal - RICHARD TRUGMAN
Caterer - TASTE BUDS
Welfare Worker - BARBARA YARBROUGH

Additional Photography Unit
Production Coordinator - MIKE TREAS

Sound Mixer - VIC CARPENTER
HERBERT L. SWANN
Gaffers - STEPHANIE BLAKEMORE
ROBERT MORENO
Best Boy Electrical - LARRY ROTH
Electrician - DARRYL MURCHISON
Key Grip - JERRY MADORE
Best Boy Grip - GARY SHAW
Grip - JIM PHILLIPS
Swing Grip/Electrical - JIM HOOKER
Special Effects - TERRY WOOLMAN
Special Effects Assistant - RONALD "DIZZY" EVERETT
Transportation Coordinator - CHRIS HAMPTON

Special Visual Effects Produced at - APOGEE PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Special Effects Consultant - JOHN DYKSTRA
Optical & Visual Effects Supervisor - STEPHEN BROOKS
Postproduction Optical Supervisor - ROGER DORNEY
Optical Printer Operator - JERRY POOLER
Optical Line-up - DENNIS DORNEY
JIM SELTENREICH
Film Processing - ALAN SPILKOMAN
Animation Supervisor - CLINT COLVER
Animators - HARRY MOREAU
JOHN SHOURT
Optical Still Photographer - MICHAEL MIDDLETON
Optical Effects Editor - JOSEPH YANUZZI
President - DEAN SHARITS
Vice President Production - BOB SHEPHERD
Production Liaison - JOHN SWALLOW
Optical Fire Effects - TONY HOOPER

Sound by - MOVIESOUND, INC.
Supervising Sound ADR Editor - BARNEY CABRAL
Sound Editors - MARK HOLLINGSWORTH
PHIL HABERMAN
ASCHER YATES
DON LEE JORGENSEN

SCOTT WOLF
Assistant Sound Editors - KELLY CABRAL
LIZ KENTON
Foley Artists - PATRICK CABRAL
TIM CHILTON
Apprentice Sound Editors - LISA CABRAL
JANE McCORD
Music Editor - DICK BERNSTEIN
Music Sampler - J. VALENTINE
Negative Cutter - SID COLE/MAGIC FILMWORKS
Color Timer - JEFF SMITHWICK
Re-recording by - RYDER SOUND SERVICES, INC.
Re-recording Mixers - DON MacDOUGALL
STAN KASTNER
Titles and Additional Opticals - HOLLYWOOD OPTICAL SYSTEMS,
INC.
Typography - CARL MARTIN
Picture Cars Provided by - BOB & HERMAN HADLER ENTERPRISES
CHRYSLER MOTORS CORPORATION
MAZDA MOTORS, INC.
CARPENTER CARS
Location Equipment Supplied by - SEQUOIA RENTALS
Studio Equipment Provided by - HOLLYWOOD RENTALS, INC.
Film Processed by - ALPHA CINE LABORATORIES, INC.
Lighting by - EGO LIGHTING
Location Sound by - SKYLAND SOUND
Paranormal Consultant - ZACHARY SELIG
Filmed with PANAVISION Cameras & Lenses

APPENDIX II

PAGES FROM THE SKETCHBOOK

During the course of production on *Spontaneous Combustion*, a sketchbook was passed around to the cast and crew, and their contributions were solicited. On the following pages is a small sampling of drawings that made their way into the book.

It would be impractical to include the entire contents of the sketchbook in these pages (in fact, many of my favorites failed to make the cut), but I believe that this modest representative selection is indicative of the witty, idiosyncratic, and diversely talented individuals likely to be found among the cast and crew of virtually any motion picture.



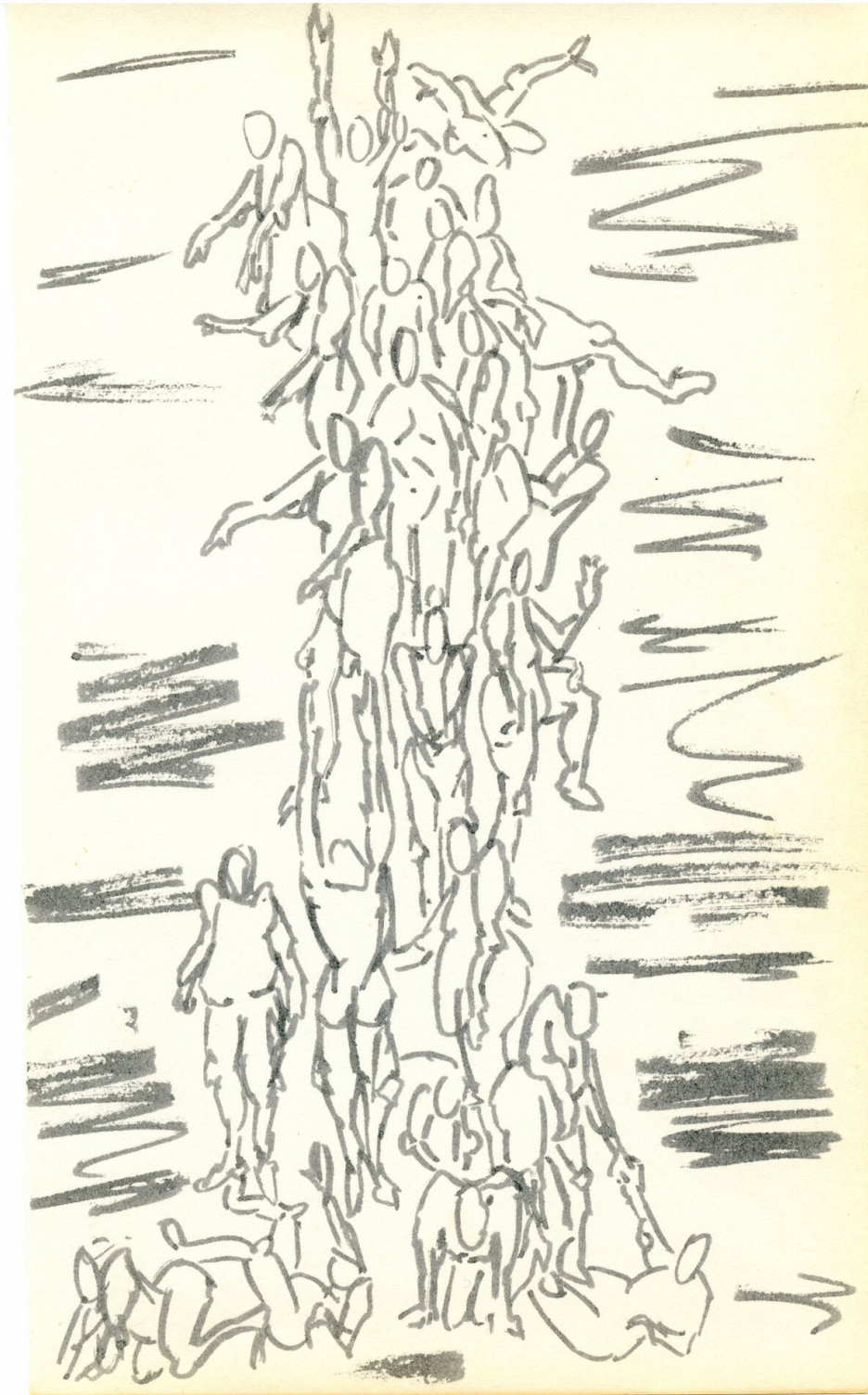
Prop man Bill Roberts contributed this dead-on accurate caricature of director Tobe Hooper to the sketchbook.



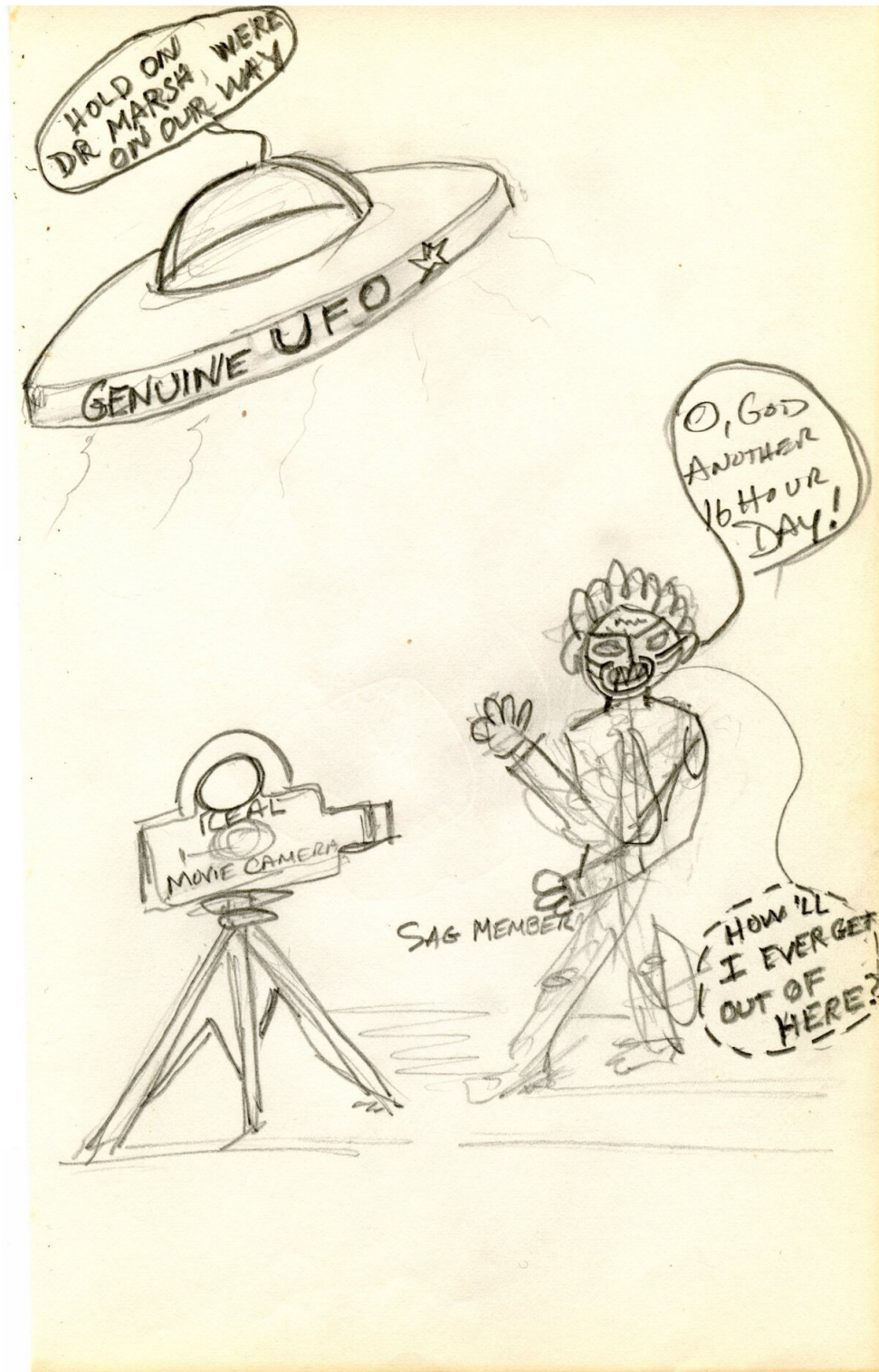
Director Tobe Hooper's impressionistic self-portrait as the creator of *Spontaneous Combustion* (note the tiny toy carousel at the center of the drawing).



Electrician Molly Cheshire's striking rendition of "Arborus Incendiarus," a fiery crystalline cactus.



Actor Brian Bremer's orgiastic tower of writhing bodies was only the first of his eight contributions to the sketchbook. As I wrote at the time, "Clearly, the boy has a lot on his mind."



Actor Jon Cypher's bizarre, childlike sketch of a fantasy alien invasion makes me wonder exactly what goes on inside his head.



Brad Dourif's 14-year-old daughter Kristina contributed to the sketchbook this wonderful drawing of her father as Sam Kramer suffering the effects of spontaneous combustion.



The author's affectionate caricature of 1st assistant director Paul Moen in an uncharacteristically foul mood. (When the drawing was reprinted on the call sheet, the phrase "Shut the FUCK up!" was changed to the more pedestrian but less objectionable "Quiet!")



Art director Richard McGuire's frighteningly on-the-nose drawing of unit production manager Sanford Hampton.



Lead actor Brad Dourif's fascinating portrait of himself as a man engulfed in flames.



Wardrobe supervisor Julia Gombert's lovely, evocative drawing is, I think, one of the best in the sketchbook.

SPECIAL THANKS

The author would like to extend his heartfelt appreciation for their support and encouragement to the late, great Tobe Hooper and Eric Lasher, Tony Hooper, Levie Isaacks, Frank Guttler, Scout Tafoya, Kristopher Woofter, Will Dodson, Mira Singer for her sure editorial hand, the entire cast and crew of *Spontaneous Combustion*, and, especially, the remarkable Julius Banzon, writer of the extraordinary blog, *The Tobe Hooper Appreciation Society*, and the best friend that anyone could hope to have.

[1] Or Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), which lambastes various types of masculine authority in its military and "mad" science figures. In *Monkey Shines*, however, the added parallel to *Spontaneous Combustion* comes in the exploration of masculinity through male bodies that are made both vulnerable—victimized, paralyzed—and powerful through destructive supernatural forces over which they have only precarious control.

[2] The Cohen, Carpenter and Yuzna films have since received critical reappraisal. See, for example, Tony Williams' *Larry Cohen: The Radical Allegories of an Independent Filmmaker* (2014), Violet Lucca's article on *Society* (in *Film Comment*, 51.5, 2015), and D. Harlan Wilson's *They Live* (Cultographies, Columbia University Press, 2015). See also my reassessment of *Monkey Shines* in "The Death of Death: A Memorial Retrospective on George A. Romero (1940-2017)" in *Monstrum* 1 (April 2018), <https://www.monstrum-society.ca/monstrum-1-2018.html>.

[3] See Will Dodson's essay "'Sex or the Saw, Boy, What's It Gonna Be?': Tobe Hooper's Anxious Men" and Clayton Dillard's essay "Get Back to Work!": Critiquing the Hollywood Industrial Complex in *The Mangler*"—both in *American Twilight: The Cinema of Tobe Hooper*—for a treatment of *The Mangler* in the context of troubled masculinity and the Hollywood juggernaut, respectively.

[4] At the time of our research for the book, that is. While it remains unavailable on DVD or Blu-Ray, it has since been posted to YouTube by its producer Fred Miller (posted 28 March, 2020, <https://youtu.be/aShnbK7ktyc>. Last accessed 28 August, 2021).

[5] Another such expert is the fan-scholar Julius Banzon, coordinator of the Tobe Hooper Appreciation Society (<http://cranialblowout.blogspot.com/>), which offers voluminous critical ways of (re-)experiencing Hooper's work.

[6] Giese's account of the shooting of this "lost" scene makes one long for a director's cut of *Spontaneous Combustion*. I fear this is unlikely. Wonderful as it is that the film is actually available, the 2018 blu-ray version of the film features no extras and no commentary, let alone a sense of what Hooper intended the film to be. The fact that the blu-ray was distributed by a company called "Cheezy Films," its logo embossed onto the film's title sequence, testifies to the sad derision that has kept Hooper's films from 1990 onward on the outer rim of viewership and scholarship.

[7] Email from Stan Giese, 25 November, 2019.

[8] In the same email message from 25 November, 2019, Stan keenly attributes the image to Bremer's having "recently been in Brian Yuzna's *Society*, so possibly a hold-over from that."

[9] Pronounced "toh-bee," for the uninitiated.

[10] SHC is an acronym for Spontaneous Human Combustion, the clinical term for the paranormal phenomenon that inspired the film.

[11] Unfortunately, this amounts to the sum total of Judith's appearances as Jennifer Strikes (except for a pick-up of this scene shot in the Valencia Studios parking lot the following week), a character originally intended to play a much more significant role in the finished film.

[12] This entire sequence was excluded from the final cut of the film, likely as a result of the decision to drastically reduce the importance of the character of Jennifer (who in the script was a third-generation subject of the "Project Samson" experiments) and the misbegotten desire to "streamline" the narrative. Unfortunately, as a result, Tegan West's wonderful performance was jettisoned, eliminating Springer as Sam's faculty foil and as a potential red herring in the film's internecine conspiracy plot. Also gone is some telling interplay between Sam and Lisa, which revealed the nature of their romantic relationship in greater detail.

[13] In the script, during a frantic phone call, Sam reveals Nina's home address to Lisa, who races there to investigate. Receiving no answer to her insistent knocking at the front door, Lisa sneaks into the house through the unlocked kitchen. Almost immediately, Lisa is startled by a gun-wielding neighbor who, in nosing around, has apparently stumbled upon Nina's lifeless body. In the finished film, however, Lisa never makes the journey to Nina's home.

[14] My snarky journal entry regarding the actor playing the guard refers to him as "The never-to-be-famous Paul Barresi!" Ironically, Barresi attained a kind of infamy the following year, telling *The National Enquirer* that he had been engaged in a two-year sexual affair with actor John Travolta, but later retracted the claim. He also became enmeshed in the 1994 Michael Jackson child molestation

controversy, selling tape recordings of alleged victims to other tabloid newspapers. Subsequently, he's gained notoriety as a prolific director of gay porn films. Eventually, the role of the guard is deemed superfluous, and Barresi is cut from the film entirely.

[15] In the script, when Nina shows Sam her collection of home movies, he muses that in his dream visions he had always taken the photoflood lights to be the glowing eyes of a monster, but the reference was cut from the finished film.

[16] De Toth's long speech is severely truncated in the release version of the film.

[17] Interestingly enough, Kali is also the name for one of the seven tongues of Agni, the Vedic God of Fire, although this is probably taking the idea of conceptual continuity much too far.

[18] In addition to her frequent appearances in series television, Stacy's notable film appearances include Neil LaBute's *In the Company of Men* and a turn as Michael Cera's mother in Greg Mottola's hugely successful *Superbad*.

[19] In fact, Brian and I became very close friends, and still correspond to this day. While I never got to see his production of *No Exit*, I did attend a performance at Pepperdine of Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning absurdist play *Seascape*, in which Brian portrayed a bewildered retiree who, along with his excitable wife, share an encounter on the beach with a pair of English-speaking, human-sized lizards disenchanted with their lives in the sea. Brian went on to appear as a devious and lustful mechanical boy in Martin Kitrosser's *Silent Night, Deadly Night 5: The Toy Maker*, co-starring with the indefatigable Mickey Rooney. He gives yet another notable performance in David DeCoteau's soft-core sex comedy *Test Tube Teens from the Year 2000* (aka *Virgin Hunters*), playing a horny teenager escaping a future in which fornication has been outlawed. Since relocating in 1994 to Atlanta, he's pursued a successful career as a producer and director of regional film and theater projects, as well as being one of the driving forces behind the celebrated Atlanta-based comedy improvisation troupe, Sketchworks.

[20] I'm familiar with the story, and in truth the monastery was located on a sheer mountainside facing away from the city, which better explains the monk's survival rate than any supposed supernatural intervention.

[21] Tragically, in 2009, Lou Perryman was murdered in his own home by a drunken interloper, sending a shockwave of sadness through the devoted ranks of horror fandom and leaving a gaping void in the Austin film and theater community.

[22] Melinda continues to be a highly regarded and in much sought-after actress. In 1991, she gave a heartbreaking performance as Nick Nolte's fragile twin sister in Barbra Streisand's *The Prince of Tides*. More recently, she brought a quiet dignity to her role as the long-suffering wife of Philip Baker Hall's curmudgeonly game show host in Paul Thomas Anderson's phantasmagoric *Magnolia*.

[23] Judith's appearance in this scene was cut, effectively eviscerating her role in the film.

[24] Sadly, less than two years later, I learned that Monty had been killed in a tragic vehicular accident. It was a terrible loss, not only because of his youth and the bright future that certainly would have awaited him, but also because he was one of the friendliest, most hardworking and unassuming people that I'd ever met. In my sketchbook, he drew a crude but charming portrait of himself in his Martian headset, riding a skateboard and wearing a T-shirt that reads, "Do it Sober!" It's one of my favorites in the book.

[25] Garriss went on to gain well-deserved success for directing the 1994 television miniseries *The Stand*, based on Stephen King's voluminous postapocalyptic novel, as well as creating and producing the acclaimed anthology series *Masters of Horror*.

[26] Although late in his career, Prince still managed a few film and television roles in the '90s, notably in a brief appearance in Ron Howard's "dramedy" *The Paper*, and also as a corrupt banker in an episode of *Law and Order*. He passed away in 1996 at age 83.

[27] David has since had a long, successful career as a chief lighting technician, primarily on network television series like *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Shield*. In 1992, he wed actress Season Hubley (probably best remembered for her co-starring role as a sympathetic prostitute opposite George C. Scott in Paul Schrader's brutal drama *Hardcore*), but the marriage ended after two years.

[28] Speaking of Brad's trailer, until the previous week, he had occupied a modest but functional motor home. Then William Prince arrived on the scene housed in a luxurious movie trailer that might easily have accommodated an entire rock band. Needless to say, when Prince left the show, Brad appropriated it for himself.

[29] That this entire sequence was replaced with the new ending is a terrific shame, since it's unlikely that anyone will ever get to see Brad's astonishing performance, which is some of the best work I've ever seen committed to film.

[30] Paul moved up to unit production manager quickly, and in the intervening years has worked on both esoteric and high-profile projects, such as Henry Selick's blissfully twisted *Monkeybone* and Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

[31] The whole "eye in the phone" gag was yet another cutting room casualty, which is a shame, since it was one of the most bizarre and startling images conceived for the film. Tony later lent his considerable talents to Glenn Gordon Caron's *Wilder Napalm*, a film about a pair of adult brothers with pyrokinetic powers (written by Vince Gilligan, who would go on to tremendous success with both *The X-Files* and the astonishing AMC series *Breaking Bad*). Also, Tony created the design for the creepy, malevolent laundry-folding machine in his father's adaptation of Stephen King's short story *The Mangler*. Perhaps most notably, Tony is the writer and director of *All American Massacre*,

a prequel of sorts to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, featuring Bill Moseley reprising his role of Chop-Top. Both Eric and I worked with Tony on the film, and I even played a small role. Unfortunately, as of this writing, the film has yet to be completed.

[32] I hate that wig. To me, it's a patently obvious fake, but in all the critical remarks I've heard regarding the film, no one has ever mentioned it.

[33] The entire dream sequence featuring Barbara Leary was eliminated from the film's final cut. However, she does make an appearance in the movie in the form of a still photograph on the tiny television screen in Olander's limousine during a news broadcast announcing the death of Amy Whitaker.

[34] Of course, although no objective viewer has ever mentioned it to me, I can't help but notice.

[35] Unfortunately, the effect of Dey's dissolving face cannot be fully appreciated in the finished film, obscured as it is by (with all due respect) poorly rendered, superimposed bursts of flame.

[36] Levie's career has flourished over the past two decades. He and Tobe worked together again on the USA Network's *I'm Dangerous Tonight*, as well as on an episode of HBO's *Tales from the Crypt* entitled *Dead Wait*. He was cinematographer on Fox TV's *Malcolm in the Middle* for five seasons and also directed several episodes. As of this writing, he is currently in pre-production on a film titled *No Better Place to Die*, written and directed by Dale Dye.

[37] There's little need to enumerate the long list of exceptional performances that Brad Dourif has crafted in the years since *Spontaneous Combustion*, but that list would have to include his role as Dr. Gediman, the ethically challenged scientist in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's fourth installment of the *Alien* series, *Alien: Resurrection*, his turn as the dithering Doc Cochran in David Milch's florid and violent western series on HBO, *Deadwood*, and, of course, his truly terrifying realization of J. R. R. Tolkien's vile character Grima Wormtongue in Peter Jackson's superlative *Lord of the Rings* films.

[38] Cynthia Bain went on to appearances in TV shows like *Murder, She Wrote* with Angela Lansbury and *Unfabulous* with Emma Roberts, but predominantly makes her living nowadays as an acting coach and performance consultant. Her acting school, Cynthia Bain's Young Actor Studio, is the preeminent training ground for fledgling actors in Hollywood. One of her students, Hailee Steinfeld, was recently nominated for an Oscar for her role in Joel and Ethan Coen's remake of *True Grit*.

[39] Appropriately enough, this last shot on the shooting schedule is also the final image in the finished film.